

The lives and voices of extraordinary people performing magic every day. Amrita's writing makes their simplicity and steadfastness glow in the glorious colour and poetry they deserve.

-Prof. Nivedita Menon, Political Scientist, Jawaharlal Nehru University

BEING EARTH

Portraits of Militant Nonviolence

AMRITA NANDY



Foreword by Suraj Jacob

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Amrita Nandy



Seva Mandir

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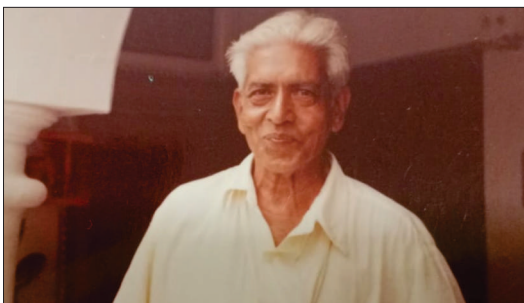
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Dedicated to the memory of



Shri Umed Mal Lodha

Shri Umed Mal Lodha joined Seva Mandir in 1985, after he retired from the agriculture service of the government. He became the pivot of Seva Mandir's forestry programme till he retired from Seva Mandir in 1999. On his passing away in 2000, the Umed Mal Lodha Memorial Trust was created in his memory to honour grassroots individuals and groups for conservation of common village resources with the Umed Mal Lodha Memorial Trust Awards.



Shri S.N. Bhise

Shri Bhise retired from the Forest Service in 1993 and joined Seva Mandir to lead its Natural Resources Unit for close to two decades. He had approved the first-ever Joint Forest Management micro-plan in the State of Rajasthan. He was the visionary who seeded the idea of the Van Utthan Sangh.



**The Van Utthan Sansthan and its
militant nonviolent village members**
(for the Van Utthan Sansthan, see page xix-xx)

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Preface

Often, the research-writing-archiving of 'social work' recounts action, not actors. If and when it centres the actors, it lists activities and the social-public outcomes achieved, framed in secular and development language.

This work is an attempt to back up on that order—it spotlights a cast of actors and the sacred spirit that fires their heart-minds. This angle, I hope, can bridge the distance we tend to imagine (and endorse) between the social and the personal, and the natural and the sublime.

After all, these seemingly dual nodes are truly one. It is their non-duality that softens hardened ideas - about development, people-State relations, NGOs, conflicts, leadership, and so on – towards alternate paradigms we write off as passé. It is what makes each person behind these portraits build new cultures of shared meaning, not of romantic idealism but ideal realism.

In fact, there are many more who embody this non-duality than those featured or named in this slim book. Like farmer-forest activist Jhalam Chand Angari from the village of Shyampura, Jhadol. In his over 40 years of public service, he too did the work that each of the ten portraits repeat—building awareness, consensus and conscience building, painstaking negotiations with the many powers that be, and of course hands-on physical labour. He too embodies, in his words, '*bhaav mein badlaav*' (broadly, a transformation of one's sentiment and motivation). In

his case too, the *badlaav* (transformation) occurred after a period and process of the clash between one's conditioning and unconditioning. Like when Jhalam Chand quit his public-service work in search of a better-paying job. He leveraged his leadership skills to be a power broker and a *mate* (Hindi for wage labour supervisor) at government work sites. The new position was lucrative but was mired in corruption. Shaken, he walked back to his job at Seva Mandir, choosing *imaandari* (honesty) over *paisa* (money). When Jhalam Chand set up a small shop in his village to grind flour, he pledged to not follow the norm—pilfering grain that belonged to poor workers. *'Mera lalach kam hua'* (my greed lessened), admits Jhalam Chand.

Like the absolute reality that once seen cannot be unseen, for Jhalam Chand and his many comrades (some of whom are captured in the following pages), life and livelihood are driven by a higher impulse. Dheera Ram calls it *alakh*, that profound word for the life-source of the Universe. It manifests in Dhula Ram's equanimity, Takhat Singh's striking courage in defence of Kirtan, Ramlal's evolving understanding of *inquilaab* (revolution). This *bhaav* (sentiment) outstrips its translation I offered above; it can also be seen as a more fundamental shift in one's own sense of self and search for meaning.

The potency of such change is not limited to men, although that may be the impression conveyed by their outnumbering of women in this book. However, the narratives testify the impact on women whose lives were touched by or bore witness to the slow-simmering practice of nonviolent, ethical struggle. Their personhood expanded as they were no longer quarantined by the domestic and feminine. Instead, they found purpose and validation in the social, natural, and the divinity of the Universe. This is remarkable because unlike the men, all women - Bhurki, Leela, Santosh and others I encountered - had an extra cross to carry. Their struggles began

within their homes when their families refused to support their public roles and lives. Undaunted, Bhurki composed feminist poems and sang them for and along other women during meetings, Leela Devi dipped into her *nirgun* (formless) refuge via the mystic Kabir, and Santosh twinned her reverence for forests with a critique of patriarchy. As they came into their own, their families too experienced a radical learning curve.

The being and doing of these village leaders evokes Austrian writer Rainer Maria Rilke's stunning poem 'Onto a Vast Plain' that summons us to "be earth now, and evensong". Hence the title, *Being Earth*. The subtitle evokes the Gandhian shade of utmost nonviolence that these rural *satyagrahis* deployed for their sacred-secular journey and destination.

- Amrita Nandy

Gratitude

Seva Mandir first approached me for an English translation of their book *Gudri ke Lal*. When I read that book, it raised many questions for me, especially the psycho-spiritual lives and contexts of the villagers it sketched. What spurred structurally-excluded Adivasi communities in remote, hilly ~ or inaccessible villages to take on consciousness-raising work, one of the most difficult roles to play in public service? And so, I offered to write these portraits afresh with first-hand meetings and visits to the field.

Am grateful, Ajay Mehta, for your trust and acceptance of this proposal and then on for your unwavering support and encouragement. Hemraj Bhati was always a call away to share detailed notes all through this experience. I owe the team at Seva Mandir - Ronak Shah, Narendra Jain Mangu Singh Rawat, Kavita Shekhawat, and Parvez Akhter – for their patience and kindness, despite the many delays at my end. Kudos to you all for Seva Mandir's continuum of work on the commons.

Thank you Suraj for your gift of the Foreword; it frames the portraits seamlessly in your thoughtful critique of mainstream discourse on development and the depth you add to community-led, value-based work.

Deep gratitude to my parents and Meena, the youngest member of our household in Udaipur.

- Amrita Nandy

Foreword. Stirrings of Collective Conscience.

It is humbling and heartening to read the cases in *Being Earth*. Amrita Nandy's writing style of minimalist elegance mirrors the quietly compelling lives of the protagonists. We are reminded that the local is the real and that there are many, many *laals* (beloved of the earth) in many, many local spaces. Modernity and discourses of facile progress and development often dull us into forgetting that we need a different lens to perceive wholesome social lives. I felt this in the author's phrase introducing Dheera Ram Kapaya of Kadha village: "Born to poor parents and rich forests." The simple phrase invokes a complex reflection on the meaning of 'poor', a category that has itself been impoverished in mainstream development.

This essay presents two reflections based on the book. The first is on stirrings of individual and collective conscience leading to solidarity and constructive work. The second is on how the bright lights of facile and narrow 'development' push such stirrings to the shadows of our consciousness.

Stirrings of conscience

The cases in the book remind us about the transformative power of addressing challenges from within—within local communities and within individuals themselves. In the case of Bhurki Bai of Alsigarh village, the challenge of water scarcity was addressed by local residents repairing a village anicut and well. One can feel how digging into the earth went along

with digging into inner resources. The cases suggest that individual and social transformation are fused—the social inheres in the individual, as sociologist Norbert Elias observed. As the author asks in the case of Uday Lal Suthar of Kishanpura, “what is it that animates his radical spirit, his work on the collective conscience?” The cases offer many glimpses towards an answer. Often there is an opportunity that, with discernment on the part of the individual, becomes a spiritual ‘call’. For Uday Lal, a call by Seva Mandir for a meeting in a neighbouring village became a deeper call of individual and social conscience. For Dhula Ram Kharadi of Jhabla village, the journey to ‘*vikas purush*’ started with a call from Seva Mandir for adult literacy classes. The desire “to feel bold and worthy” was the vehicle for Ramlal Pargi of Medi village. Somewhere in the journey, the individual senses the difference between having a job - having a *naukri* (job), being a *karamchhari* (staff member) - and being a *karyakarta* (colleague) whose work is animated by a larger mission. The author notes this explicitly in the case of Dheera Ram Kapaya: “He spotted the difference between having a job and being on a mission, and knew then that he wanted the latter.” The Latin root of ‘mission’ emphasises inner spirit sending forth an individual to social action. The inner spirit is invoked explicitly in Dheera Ram’s song: “*main alakh jagana aaya*” (I have come to awaken your deeper consciousness).

The cases also reveal how social causes transform individuals in unexpected ways. For Dheera Ram Kapaya, the struggle against smugglers in the community forest and the work for village literacy centres unexpectedly culminated in his becoming an artist! Journeys into the social are simultaneously inward journeys, as culture scholar Joseph Campbell has noted. In this context, a senior colleague of mine, John Kurien, once remarked that the common practice of calling an individual a ‘catalyst’ for social change is misinformed. In chemistry, a catalyst facilitates a chemical reaction while itself remaining unchanged, but in the social world an

individual who facilitates change also necessarily undergoes personal transformation in the process.

When inner spirit is the energy for reaching out in the community, it usually goes with empathy, affection, and '*sahan shakti*' (forbearance), Uday Lal Suthar tells us. The effort is long and continuous. Bhurki Bai says: "I reached out again and again, spoke of our shared poverty and suffering, and responded with affection." Seva Mandir facilitated the process. For instance, for Leela Devi Meena of Lathuni village, the organisation emboldened her to go outside the home and find a place in the community; she later participated in community dialogues and eventually become a community leader. This is hardly instant or assured—it is a "long, arduous journey of truth and common good," Priyanka Singh (past Chief Executive of Seva Mandir) tells the author. In the case of Leela Devi, it took "hundreds of conversations...many repeated again and again across the 500 odd families of Lathuni" to form the impressive network of SHGs that exists there today. The approach is reminiscent of that of Gandhi. Historian Judith Brown notes that for Gandhi, social action – whether of *satyagraha* resistance or constructive work – necessarily involved physical, moral, and spiritual preparation.

If our 'unalienated' selves have become recessive, as philosopher Akeel Bilgrami suggests, then the process of building solidarity is a recovery of the unalienated self in an organic, 'unselfconscious' manner. The process can be fragile and there is much tending and nurturing involved. Thus, Dhula Ram Kharadi recalls that when the idea of securing the common forest land of Jhabla was initially discussed, many community members did not agree as they feared material losses, including of lands. And Uday Lal Suthar remembers that the seemingly simple task of planting trees proved to be very difficult because villagers had to confront powerful interests from within who had encroached common lands. Recovery of our community-

oriented, unalienated selves is a fraught task. The pushes and pulls on individual and social lives are enormous. The pressures are especially acute for the youth, notes Devi Lal: “The young generation of Amivada is more educated than ever. But I wonder if the community lands we worked so hard for will stay after our generation is gone.” Many people, and perhaps especially the youth, may not place value on the work of strengthening community internally and may depend overly on the outside, including on Seva Mandir. Kirtan Kumar Kasota says about residents of Sultan ji ka Kherwada village who had barren community pasture land: “They waited for Seva Mandir to do something.” He adds that the organisation's response was: “We can show you the path, but you have to walk on it. We will stay right behind you.”

When sociality is recovered and solidarity is strengthened, the cases suggest, communities can develop the capacity for 'restorative justice'—to heal relations after harm is caused, and to do it in a way that draws in the community and assures dignity to both victim and perpetrator. This is shown in the case cited by Sapna Kunwar in the portrait on Devi Lal of Amivada village. After a woman left her husband on account of his alcoholism and abuse, the husband approached the women's SHG for help. After the collective counselled him and he promised better behaviour, community members persuaded the woman to go back to him. Such uplifting outcomes can hardly be taken for granted. Rather than approach the collective with contrition, the husband could have taken a defiant stance of warped masculinity. Rather than dialogue and restoration, the collective could have rained down retribution—or what happens more often, the community could simply have looked the other way or even justified his abuse. Individual and collective anxiety and hurt need not always lead communities down a path of reflection, compassion, and restoration. The path depends on the presence of *naitikta* (morality) from the stirrings of

collective conscience. Gandhi writes in *Hind Swaraj*: “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms... The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means 'good conduct'.” In the cases presented in the book, we read of leaders who “sublimated their deep disquiet, if not destructive impulses, into a non-violent force for years of constructive work,” as Ajay Mehta (past President of Seva Mandir) remarks in the chapter on Devi Lal.

The bright lights of narrow 'development'

We live in a world of supersizing where scale rules and where 'development' is about ambitious mega projects that are also inherently highly centralising. And mainstream development discourse has shifted to accommodate these trends. Against all this are set the cases of *Being Earth*. To build relationships, sense of community, and collective conscience is to take the local seriously, to expand 'inner' and 'outer' freedoms – as political theorist Dennis Dalton puts it – and to locate them in the local and strive for common ground and common purpose.

The cases suggest that the actions of the book's protagonists and their communities are driven less by macro imperatives from the outside and more by local, individual, and collective needs that necessitate accounting for and living with others in the community. Thus, in Dhula Ram Kharadi's narrative of building the village road, we see the emphasis on nurture and community engagement—it “required much patient energy to persuade villagers and then co-ordinate the entire road-building endeavour,” with considerable *shramdaan* (voluntary labour). By contrast, the mainstream development approach would be to outsource infrastructure building to an outside contractor who offers the least price and likely exploits workers and environment.

The village road is one of many instances of constructive work mentioned across the cases, all showing the dialectic between building community and building commons. Another commons infrastructure, the anicut, features in several cases. A small anicut helps to store water locally. It stores just enough for modest local needs and its low wall allows much water to flow past. A large dam would be about macro needs to which the local community would not be able to relate. It would cut off the flow or at least allow humans to greatly control natural flow. And it would need outside control and complex institutional arrangements not conducive to local community engagement. The anicut can build local community but the large dam tends to enervate.

The anicut also offers a fecund metaphor. Imagine flowing water as the everyday flow of social life. The anicut wall offers a pause to the flow so that people can gather and discuss, and build community and common resolve. The anicut wall is low enough to allow further flow of social life. By contrast, a large dam inevitably means outside, central control. It stops too much of society and is not conducive to small community discussions. It can produce dispirited villagers unable to build the resolve to overcome individuation. It breaks off all possibility of further movement (flow) except through mass petitioning and mass resistance to central controllers, and it can be met with hostility and even repression. All this is quite different from building local community relationships. The anicut is small enough to allow possibilities of solidarity, local commons, and constructive work. In the case of Gandhi, Judith Brown observes that he was most satisfied when the matter at hand involved a small group that could build common resolve and exercise common discipline—the ashram in Sabarmati or Wardha, or the mobilisation in specific locations such as Champaran, Ahmedabad textile mills, and Dandi. In contrast are the bigger national efforts such as the non-cooperation movement of the early 1920s where deeper common resolve

and discipline did not occur and lead to the Chauri Chaura incident. The Amivada *satyagraha* (chapter on Devi Lal) clearly belongs in the former category. Government refusal became the anicut that allowed Amivada villagers to take time and deliberate and build resolve.

While the stories are about community leaders, social conscience, and collective work, they play out in the background of a strong regulatory State that is felt even in villages that are distant from the seats of *sarkari* (official) authority. The 'no objection certificate' (NOC) is emblematic of State authority; it requires citizens to constantly petition the State for permission to act in domains that the State has taken over. Thus, Bhurki Bai and others in Aligarh had to procure an NOC simply to repair their anicut by themselves, and Devi Lal and others in Amivada had to procure an NOC simply to harvest and sell the bamboo they had grown. The standard justification of State power is the State's developmentalist identity and the State's role as preserver of the public good against potential mischief by citizens. Whether or not in principle such enormous authority for the State is justifiable, the lived experience of villagers does not show the State in a good light. Aligarh residents received their NOC only with difficulty and after several trips and petitions. Amivada residents found that not only did the state refuse to give an NOC, but it was also indifferent to the impending loss of bamboo (whose harvesting was time-sensitive) despite ten years' worth of tending by the villagers. The NOC came through at the very end only when the villagers were starting their *satyagraha*. The State seemed to be reactive rather than proactive, and cared more for its image rather than development, ethical governance, and villagers' concerns. It is not surprising that despite the last-minute NOC, the State later continued to show indifference. When Amivada villagers took the harvested bamboo to the godown, they had several difficulties at various government scrutiny points on the journey, and further difficulties after reaching the government godown.

These matters come out clearly in the long struggle following the passage of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and documented in the chapter on Kirtan Kumar Kasota. Years of dialogue and solidarity building by the Van Utthan Sansthan, a community-based organization facilitated by Seva Mandir, led it to put forward several petitions to reclaim community forests under the FRA provision for community forest rights (CFR). The chapter observes that the concerned government officer (SDM) “was struck by this extraordinary demand” since the State was used to receiving only claims for individual lands under the FRA provision for individual forest rights. The SDM's surprise reflects the individuation expected by the State and towards which it has been complicit. However, the government's response to community reclamation of community lands was simply to drag its feet, and the issue dragged on for years through the bureaucratic maze and stonewalling. Only when the matter was placed before the wider public through a press conference did the State temporarily shake off its indifference and start processing the community claims. Kiran Kumar makes an interesting assertion: “Before community forest rights, villagers saw the forests as belonging to the government, even though they would secretly use its resources and even cut trees. But with rights, they see the forests as their own and feel the need to look after them.” That is, external control by a distant State individuates people and enervates solidarity, but internal community control can potentially reclaim solidarity so that individual actions internalize the common good. Such stories are still evolving; even after CFR lands are formally transferred to communities, there is no guarantee that community governance of those lands will be salutary or that the dialectic of community solidarity and commons work will continue.

While State indifference and refusal became the opportunity to strengthen community bonds in cases like Amivada and the CFR lands, the

resultant stronger community bonds in these cases hardly justify the dubious State action and inaction that triggered community resistance. All too often, State action and inaction is akin to the high dam wall that dispirits and enervates. The State's reactive behaviour, when confronted by a *satyagraha* or press conference, may send the signal that State neglect can be remedied only through applying pressure by going public—and, furthermore, that power asymmetry and injustice can justify the use of such 'weapons of the weak', as James C. Scott puts it. In these circumstances, *sangharsh* (struggle and resistance for outer freedom) is attractive. But it may also lead to neglecting the continual work of internal strengthening of community and constructive work around the commons. The cases in the book remind us that while *sangharsh* is not – and should not be – the defining feature of community, it is necessary when there is large, adverse interference from outside forces such as the State. But simultaneously, the cases remind us that *sangharsh* should be proactive rather than reactive—proactive through the long process of building community and stirring collective conscience. That proactive process is *nirmaan* (constructive work for inner freedom). The combination – *sangharsh aur nirmaan* – is thus attractive. This was the 1980s catchphrase associated with Shankar Guha Niyogi, a leader of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha. Similarly, in his last work, Ambedkar – who is commonly associated with *sangharsh* and social justice – underlines fraternity through *karuna* (“loving kindness to human beings”) and *maitri* (“extending fellow feeling to all beings, not only to one who is a friend, but also to one who is a foe”).

The cases of the book all show *nirmaan*, and where needed, also *sangharsh*. We can see both in Gandhi's practice, but with different saliences. According to Judith Brown, for Gandhi civil disobedience “was very limited compared with the broader work of construction: and indeed constructive work in society, and its economic underpinnings was essential to the proper

practice of civil resistance.” In my reading, the cases of the book align with a similar sensibility: *nirmaan* always, and cautious *sangharsh* where necessary, both coming from the stirrings of individual and collective conscience and through a process of deliberations and building of common resolve.

However, the discourse and practice of mainstream 'development' are not aligned with the confluence of conscience, *nirmaan*, and *sangharsh*. Mainstream development emphasizes material outcomes, particularly health, education, and standard of living on the one hand, and employment and livelihoods on the other. The mainstream development agenda was substantially driven by the State. Historian Rajnarayan Chandavarkar notes that in modern India the politics of development and nation-building “only served to expand the space in which the state was allowed a privileged executive role ... [and] also quickened the urgency for the State to enact this executive role.” State-dominated development discourse and action have shaped other actors in the development sector, both funders (including CSR) and civil society organizations. While that development agenda may superficially appear to be *nirmaan*, the latter is about individual and collective conscience, community building and common resolve, and social action – not state action – coming from that process. In recent times, the State's development agenda has narrowed to piping in welfare benefits and service delivery. Further, mainstream development has bold outcome targets but there is relatively little emphasis on the means, which in the case of *nirmaan* is inseparable from ends.

A related aspect of development is the emphasis on welfare entitlements and rights in the last two decades. They reflect a wonderful universal aspiration for wellbeing. The welfare rights discourse was partly a response to the State's slow progress on the (narrow) track of modernity and development. However, the rights route is not quite *sangharsh*, which is predicated on building local community and the “long, arduous journey of

truth and common good” (Priyanka Singh). Indeed, in practice the process of claiming rights is often transactional, individuating, and oriented to narrow self-interest – recall the earlier discussion of individual and community forest rights under the FRA – and sometimes also self-righteous. When people without deep relationships gather together to claim rights from a State that grudges them, it is one might arrayed against another: Might through strength in numbers versus the material and political might of the State. Large-scale mobilization of people appears dramatic when seen as strength in numbers, but it can be facile when seen through the lens of collective conscience, community relations, and *maitri*.

Today, claims about development and activity in the development mainstream are louder than ever. Considerable monetary and other resources are channelled for infrastructure services, welfare benefits, and skilling for the poor to get a toehold in a massively unequal market economy. And yet, ironically, despite these dizzying 'goods', the imagination is narrow (*sankeern*) compared to the alternative imagination of collective conscience, local deliberations, common resolve, *nirmaan*, and *sangharsh*. And narrow imagination is not restricted to the development space. Despite the poet's prayer *ninda na kare keni re* (do not disparage anyone) in the *bhajan Vaishnav* Jan, anti-pluralist orientations and pressures abound and constrain cultural practices and civil liberties. In turn, narrowed development imagination and reduced appetite for pluralism are hardening sensibilities in the development sector across the State, CSRs, CSOs, and the wider public. Higher decibel levels and intolerance in the public sphere only reinforce

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1. B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (2011), Oxford University Press.
 2. Judith M. Brown, 'Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Limits of Moral Politics,' in *Gandhi's Moral Politics* (2017), Routledge India, p. 57–71.
 3. Rajnarayan S. Chandavarkar, 'Customs of Governance: Colonialism and Democracy in Twentieth Century India,' *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 41, no. 3 (2007), p. 441–470.

this. Even a mild pessimist can view the context as soul-crushing. But the cases profiled in this book speak to an ethic of development that is fundamentally different and life-affirming.

The alternative sensibility of the cases emerges in local communities where there are stirrings of individual and collective conscience. By casting our glance away from the blinding lights of narrow mainstream development imagination, the cases allow us to see that there are many stars—the *gudri ke laal** whose practices offer alternatives that can counter the anxieties and damages from mainstream development and recover our unalienated selves with dignity and compassion.

- Suraj Jacob

Trustee, Seva Mandir

* *Gudri* refers to a waste ball of cotton and *laal* means beloved child. The idiomatic connotation of the expression is the most precious among the marginalized.

Seva Mandir and the Commons. An Introduction.

Seva Mandir was conceived by Dr. Mohan Singh Mehta to alleviate poverty and foster democratic practice among the rural poor of Mewar. Dr. Mehta was an administrator in the government of Mewar, then a princely State in Rajasthan, and familiar with the plight of poor peasants. As a young man studying and working in Agra and Allahabad (renamed Prayagraj), he wanted to join the national movement but his personal circumstances prevented him from doing so. So, he decided to contribute via the Gandhian tradition of constructive work; he was also inspired by the Scout Movement that he saw as a way to build the character of youth. Though the foundation stone of Seva Mandir was laid in 1931, the work started in 1968 with an adult literacy program in the hinterlands of Udaipur. The vision for this literacy program was to enable villagers, especially tribals, to fully participate in democratic processes and benefit from the development initiatives of the State. At that time, there was neither electricity nor easy road access to rural Udaipur. Nevertheless, villagers started to attend the nightly adult literacy classes to read and write by the light of the *lalten* (lantern). During the day, they worked as farmers and labourers, and grazed their cattle and goats.

Gradually, Seva Mandir established a deeper connection with people. It learnt that besides literacy and numeracy, villagers needed to strengthen their livelihoods and engage with the Panchayats. This led to the 'Lab-to-Land' program that was supported by the government. Its intent was to transfer ideas and practices developed by agricultural scientists to the farmers.

Between the 1970s and the mid-1980s, Seva Mandir created a range of development programmes that spanned education, drought relief, women's empowerment, livelihood improvement, forestry, public health, and education. It also helped build village associations (*samooh*) to support locals exercise self-governance and collective action, as also draw the attention of the State to their needs. These efforts were not always successful because the capacity of the State to deliver 'development' was limited.

After 1985, the government constituted the National Wasteland Development Board (NWDB) to help voluntary organizations create people's movements to revitalize degraded lands. Its Chairperson, Dr. Kamla Chowdhry (an academic and civil society leader), offered Seva Mandir substantial grants to undertake large-scale afforestation projects in the hilly tracts of Udaipur district.

This was a pivotal period in the life of Seva Mandir. It gained capacity for its development work as well as test its ideas for participatory, people-led forestry instead of State forestry. Seva Mandir's forestry program was led by Umed Mal Lodha and a group of young individuals such as Neelima Khetan, Hemraj Bhati, Narendra Jain, Narayan Ameta, and in subsequent years, S. N. Bhise, Shailendra Tiwari, Priyanka Singh, and Ronak Shah.

The forestry program was implemented on a significant scale; it involved some 5,000 farmers from over 200 villages. It led Seva Mandir to decentralize large-scale afforestation, including village-based plant nurseries to raise saplings. With the help of the Society for the Promotion of Wasteland Development, Seva Mandir managed to do this successfully. Each nursery had 5,000 to 10,000 plants that were managed by villagers. In the first two years of the programme, some two million saplings were raised and planted. A cadre of village workers, with modest stipends, was created for its implementation—*Van Sahayaks* (Forest Assistant) and *Van Pals* (Forest Protector) This program had a positive impact on private lands.

However, Seva Mandir discovered that while people were happy to plant trees on their private land with a small incentive, they were not enthusiastic about planting and protecting trees on common lands such as village pastures, water sheds, and forest lands. The reason was that over time villagers had gotten used to encroaching these lands, with informal consent of State officials, elected representatives, and power brokers. Seva Mandir recognized that long-term, local governance of these common lands needed villagers (across caste, class, and gender differences) to retain common stake in the management of these lands. The practice of informal privatization of common lands needed to be reversed. It initiated a long-drawn dialogue with villagers to encourage them to decolonize the commons. Over the next four decades, these efforts yielded favourable results. Today, irrespective of their caste, class, and gender, villagers sit together (symbolized by the *jajam* or common rug) to help each other free the commons of encroachment. They also deliberate on how to equitably share the benefits from these common lands (fodder and non-timber forest produce).

In 1991, the government introduced the Joint Forest Management (JFM) program. It was a radical change in the approach to forest management. Earlier local communities were not allowed any stake in the management of forest lands. The first JFM in Rajasthan was done through Seva Mandir in Jhadol block's Shyampur village; it was facilitated by Divisional Forest Officer S. N. Bhise. He was exceptional because few officers were keen to implement JFM. Over the next 15 years, only 31 micro plans and six natural forests were approved under the JFM.

The program was rolled back by the State government in 2007 for no good reason. Given the reluctance of the Forest Department to implement its own policies, Seva Mandir started the Van Utthan Sansthan (VUS) under the leadership of Mr. Bhise who joined Seva Mandir. The VUS was

an association of Forest Protection Committees that canvassed against encroachment on common land and influenced the Forest Department to implement its progressive policies.

With Seva Mandir's facilitation, local communities have protected, conserved, and managed more than 15,000 hectares of common land. Similarly, 18 sites of *Dev-van*, *Bani* or *Oran* (sacred groves that are also common lands) have been redeveloped.

In 2006, the historical Forest Rights Act was legislated by the Parliament. It allowed villagers to jointly create management systems for local forests, under the provision of community forest rights (CFR). By 2008, Seva Mandir enabled villagers to prepare petitions for 300 CFR sites. After administrative hurdles and apathy delayed the implementation of the CFR provision by many years, the first CFR was approved in 2017; more approvals followed in 2023. The slow pace led people to protest nonviolently. In 2018, villagers in Amivada held a *satyagraha* against the government's denial of permission (despite petitioning for two years) to cut bamboo from their pasture land they had tended (details in Chapter 5). At present, 296 CFR sites have been approved—this amounts to 38,514 hectares of forests. This is a remarkable achievement, thanks to the persistence and vision of village communities that made the commons the basis of just and sustainable development.

Among other lessons this long journey brought to Seva Mandir is that people's participation in forest management can only succeed if (a) village communities are encouraged to resolve their own contradictions, and (b) agencies of the State and NGOs help prepare the social-moral foundations of public good over individual interest.

For the last 26 years, Seva Mandir has collaborated with the Umed Mal Lodha Memorial Trust to identify grassroots leaders and groups with

exemplary service for environmental conservation. Over time, this award has become an archive of the multitude of efforts underway to protect the commons. These awards have also motivated thousands at the grassroots, besides cadres of the Forest Department and State institutions, to see their history written with empathy and insight.

In recognition of its sustained efforts to support communities and their commons, Seva Mandir was awarded the 2023 Global Elinor Ostrom Award for Collective Governance of the Commons. In truth, the Award is a recognition of the people profiled in this Book and many others like them. Their courage, passion, and sacrifice bring hope to this region; they exemplify our belief that governance and ecological care can be rooted in autonomous, capacitated, and responsible local communities that embrace respectful dialogue and nonviolence.

- **Narendra Jain** (General Secretary, Seva Mandir) and

-**Ronak Shah** (Chief Executive, Seva Mandir)

Alakh Jagane Aaya¹



Dheera Ram Kapaya, 50 Years

Kada Village, Jhadol

Buried in our inner selves lie seeds of immense potential. When nourished, they can bloom into their fullest and foster those around. Like they did in the case of Dheera Ram after he crossed paths with an expansive beam of light. As this encounter unfolded over decades, it unearthed possibilities that were unknown both to the beam and the seed.

¹Translation on page 4.

Born to poor parents and rich forests, junior Dheera witnessed early the shared lives of both. Poverty, though, loomed over his childhood. The family could barely eat one meal a day. So, Dheera Ram agreed to a barter offered by a boy in the village: if Dheera Ram carried his book-laden bag to the school (five kilometers away) and back, he could get a scoop of *daliya* (porridge). This is how Dheera Ram first saw a school which he took an instant liking to. Years later, when his father finally admitted him to a school, Dheera Ram could not continue beyond class five; the distress of survival forced him to join the many adolescent workers in the area.

By 1982, his village had its first Adult Literacy Centre and, later, a library (both started by Seva Mandir). Teenager Dheera Ram would linger at the Centre, and browse and read at the library. “I saw myself in those storybooks of people's struggles and leaders. I wanted to be like them, do something big”, he states. He spotted the difference between having a job and being on a mission, and knew then that he wanted the latter. In 1985, when Seva Mandir opened its second Adult Literacy Centre in Kada, Dheera Ram was hired and trained. For the next few years, he did not just teach alphabets. He also learnt, along with his 'students', a new outlook on citizenship, public responsibility towards the commons, the relationship between humans and the more-than-human such as forests, among other aspects of the philosophy of Seva Mandir.

And so, when news spread in Kada that its teak forests were being pillaged by smugglers, Dheera Ram felt stirred. By then, he understood that if people come together for a common cause, they possess a throbbing superpower. He and his friend Shankar Lal Kharadia started to rally villagers and convince them to save their joint legacy of forests. Dheera Ram shared, “We villagers formed a vigilante group to guard the teak forests. At one point, we built a boundary wall of large stones to block the passage of the smugglers' truck. But villagers who worked with the teak mafia leaked our

plan to the smugglers who escaped by another route. On another occasion, we confronted the smugglers but they continued to steal. Once, they even fired from their pistols and threatened us all. We had to continue our struggle for a few years till we caught them red-handed and filed a case against them”.

The teak forests that look over Kada today are a tribute to the courage of Dheera Ram and team.

This victory motivated more residents of Kada to volunteer for forest protection and management. In due course, they sought to implement the Joint Forest Management work that the villagers of Shyampura had done. With support from Seva Mandir, 120 hectares of land in Kada was identified for this exercise. The villagers of Kada, a team from Seva Mandir and the Forest Department collaborated to plant and conserve trees. This intervention held special meaning for the villagers—they held special prayers and sprinkled saffron water collected from a temple they held in high esteem.

During the drought-like conditions in the early 1990s, Dheera Ram was also instrumental in facilitating access to water for the arid farms of Kada. With monetary and technical support from Seva Mandir, farmers helped install two lift irrigation machines that are still functional.

Such passionate work brought Dheera Ram acclaim and higher positions at work. As the Coordinator of a few Adult Literacy Centres in his village, Dheera Ram's radius of influence widened. For participation at the massive and annual 'Literacy Mela' enabled by Seva Mandir at Jhadol, he was able to mobilize over 200 villagers. They played drums and trumpets, and sang songs of the power of knowledge and *jal, jungle, zameen* (water, forest, and land).

Dheera Ram observed the addictive appeal of dance and music. It opened up another seed in him—Dheera Ram, the artist.

Then on, he decided to leverage the performing arts in the service of social reform. Writing songs and scripts for street plays on subjects such as environment, child marriage, forests, and such like was his new passion. With the help of local artists, Dheera Ram also started to perform at local events. It proved as powerful as Dheera Ram expected it to be—the audience was drawn both to the medium and the message.

But Dheera Ram was not content with this success. “*Mujhe logon ka dil jeetna tha, unka vyavhaar badalna tha*” (I wanted to win over people's hearts, to change their behavior”), Dheera Ram said with much conviction.

*Gavri*², the most powerful, crackling festival among the Bhils of Mewar, could be the trail to people's heart, Dheera Ram thought. So, he wrote short skits on social issues and joined those with the performance of *Gavri* the Goddess that attracted hundreds of villagers. By joining common cause with devotional spirit, Dheera Ram hit upon a stunning advocacy tool. Simple words and hummable tunes became an easy medium for the challenging work of consciousness raising. “*Main alakh jagane aaya*” (I have come to awaken your deeper consciousness) is an extract from one of his songs on water conservation.

Seeing how effectively Dheera Ram and his cultural troupe mobilized people, he found immense support from Seva Mandir via training on writing and puppetry. As word spread about his work, he was invited to perform across India and in the US. By 1995, Dheera Ram set up his own cultural group (Eklavya Kala Kendra) to continue his social work through the arts.

² Gavri is a 40-day long spiritual dance-drama that connects the divine with the lives of rural life as it travels from village to village.

Like the many characters he plays on stage, Dheera Ram has worked on natural resource conservation via many roles. In 1997, he joined the Van Utthan Sangh (Forest Conservation Committee) to mobilize villagers in Jhadol and its surrounding pockets.

The work was painstaking. To first make the public aware of the issue at hand, then to arouse in them the sensitivity towards it, and finally to mobilize them into action is all a long-haul that demands patience and resolve. For those who must navigate the many deprivations that poverty creates, engagement with such issues can be strenuous. But Dheera Ram's determination helped build a large bank of grassroots advocates. A long struggle for community forest rights of the people of Jhadol bore fruit—19 petitions were accepted. When Dheera Ram got chosen as the *Adhyaksh* (Chairperson) of the Van Utthan Sangh, he was not a chair-bound leader. Instead, he was found where the trees were being counted or the land was being measured. Inspired residents from neighbouring villages – Bhanvariya, Kyariyan, Raanpur and others – also woke up to the preservation of their respective forests.

In his position as the (previous and current) *Adhyaksh* of the *Gram Vikas Kosb* (Village Development Fund), Dheera Ram has been central to Kada's growth. Savings were used wisely to build infrastructure for the village. With funds from the Gram Panchayat, each hamlet got its own community hall as their common asset.

Dheera Ram could also cultivate among people – such as his friend Shankar Lal Kharadia – the zeal for ground-up, people-led development. He helped Shankar Lal contest and win many important positions, such as that of Sarpanch and Pradhan. Dheera Ram shared, “Kada has unanimously chosen its Sarpanch, without elections and expenditure. It has been like this for decades now. Seva Mandir taught us to practice these simple and effective ways towards a participatory democracy”. (Procedures for elections

to community-led bodies such as the Gram Vikas Samooch and Van Utthan Sangh are based on principles such as adult suffrage, representation from each hamlet, consensus for nominations, and selection of candidates. Elected members undergo trainings - offered by Seva Mandir - for their respective roles and responsibilities). Villagers and the grassroots leaders they chose managed to clear encroachments from 10 hectares of forest land in Kada. This land was then handed over to the Forest Department, even as villagers planted and nurtured its trees.

40 years after he started this work, Dheera Ram is still an active community mobilizer and an artist. For him, these identities are as braided as the ecologies of his ancestral land. Perhaps this is why the movement for the commons still pervades the spirit of Kada.

Panch Bai and Her Water Saviours



Bhurki Bai, 53 Years

Alsigarh village, Katiya, Girwa

The wavy hills that lead to Alsigarh are all the same shade of dusty brown. So stony is the earth there that farming and thereby survival has been a challenge for both humans and plants. The village of Alsigarh, though, offers some relief—visual and more. Patches of yellow, red, and green – in fact, marigold, rose, and vegetable farms—disrupt its sepia.

These flourishes of nature mirror the flourishes of human enterprise. In fact, they mirror the women of Alsigarh who saw and enacted the possibility of such flourishing—ecological, developmental, and social. Among these flourishes is Bhurki Bai.

Never schooled, married at 15, a mother at 16, and a mother to three more by 19, Bhurki Bai's youth was that brown monotone of hardship. But her grit got her to Seva Mandir, and she and Seva Mandir got to Alsigarh that splash of colour.

It was this grit that made the unschooled, adolescent Bhurki Bai sneak out of her parents' house at night to attend classes at the Adult Literacy Centre. During the day, as she watched the family's goats graze in the jungle, she used her finger as a pencil and a flat stone as her notebook to practice the Hindi letters she learnt at the literacy class. At home too, before kneading flour, Bhurki Bai would form letters on a pile of flour.

But early marriage and teenage motherhood disrupted her secret attempts to read and write. So did her husband's accident that disabled him for life. Suddenly, Bhurki Bai was the only breadwinner in the family. She did all she could for survival, such as carry huge sacks of cement on her back but still earned a pittance. "I have lived through so much poverty. We had no water, no soap, no oil. All of us had only one pair of clothes that I dried by the fire to rid them of stench".

Good fortune came calling because Bhurki Bai had grit.

Sewa Mandir was looking for someone to facilitate a women's Self Help Group (SHG) in Alsigarh. 18-year-old Bhurki Bai said yes to the opportunity, but her in-laws and husband did not. A determined Bhurki Bai went ahead, juggling domestic and public work. "The first Seva Mandir meeting I attended was with my few-weeks-old son. The Seva Mandir team taught me so much then on", recalls a beaming Bhurki Bai.

It was a new way of being for her.

She started to reach out to women in the village. Walking up and down rugged valleys, at times for several kilometers, she had to knock and talk at every door. “I would often be shouted at. Men suspected I would corrupt their women. But I reached out again and again, spoke of our shared poverty and suffering, and responded with affection”. No wonder that Vardi Chand, former Zonal In-Charge at Seva Mandir, uses the word “*sahansheel*” (tolerant) to describe her.

Her warmth melted the chill of apathy. Women started to turn up for meetings.

To stir women into a collective, Bhurki Bai even composed a poem that she and the women sang to start each meeting: “*Saheli toh banna padhe meri behna, meeting mein aana padhe meri behna, sukh-dukh toh bolna padhe meri behna, sarpanch ko bolna padhe meri behna...*” (You will have to be my friend, my Sister, you will have to attend meetings, my Sister, you will have to share your joy and sorrow, my Sister, you will have to talk to the Sarpanch, my Sister...).

Slowly, the SHGs of Alsigarh took off. Thanks to Bhurki Bai's tireless dialogues, the all-women SHG team evolved an understanding of rural development and their role in it.

In time, the SHG tackled one of the gravest concerns of the area—water scarcity. There was never ever enough water in the village to drink, let alone farm. Girls and women were affected the most—it is they who had to ferry water from as far as four kilometers, even twice a day. An anicut could resolve this, but the one constructed by the Gram Panchayat was broken. The Gram Panchayat had turned a deaf ear to Bhurki Bai's request for its repair. With guidance from Seva Mandir, Bhurki Bai

approached the Irrigation and Water Resources Department in the city of Udaipur. Despite the many bus trips she made to their office, they too paid no heed. Finally, with help from Seva Mandir, she mobilized women of the SHG to collectively present their case at the Department's office in the city. This helped, and the women received a 'No Objection Certificate' to mend the anicut. In the next few months, Bhurki Bai and the all-women SHG team decided to fix the anicut themselves!

However, the difficulties inherent in such collaborative work were many. Among others, collecting women for a few hours every day was tough because they were always working; in fact, they were always overworked. When some women had time, the others did not. It took much planning and coordination by Bhurki Bai to organize women's schedules for construction work.

The anicut repaired by the women was as good as new. The village was joyous at the result.

“Abundant water reached our farms. *Bahut zordaar kaam kiya Seva Mandir ne* (the work done by Seva Mandir is terrific). Then, they took many of us villagers to a farm in Gujarat to teach us better cultivation techniques and gave us banana seeds to plant in our private plots of land”, said Bhurki Bai, pointing to the many banana trees in her farm. Seva Mandir also distributed seeds of flowers and other crops to all villagers. For the first time, villagers could grow and sell flowers. (This is when and how the yellow, red, and green splashes appeared in the brown panorama of Alsigarh).

Excited by the possibilities of their synergy, members of the SHG later also revamped a well in the village. They gave it a boundary wall to keep garbage from flowing into it; this ensured that villagers got clean water.

The restored anicut and well brought regular water supply to the village, and resolved a decades-old concern. Bhurki Bai's exemplary work on water

provision and conservation in the village won her the national 'Women Water Champion' award of the Department of Water Resources (Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India).

In due course, with support from the Seva Mandir-facilitated Village Development Committee, some women even started to attend the meetings of the Gram Panchayat. Initially, it was hard for men and women in the village to share the *jajam* (rug used at public meetings) at the meeting—the men resisted, the women refused. Bhurki Bai credits the local team at Seva Mandir for this shift: “They were patient and persistent, they stood by us, told us to not be scared and to trust the power of our action”.

Such attempts caused powerful impacts. One, the women of Alsigarh gained a wider sense of purpose and, two, they started to speak up in public meetings on issues of rural development. Precious firsts for Alsigarh!

Today, there are 24 women's SHGs spread across 13 villages. Members can take loans of up to Rupees 20,000, bypassing moneylenders and their heavy rates of interest.

Who knew that 'SHG' could also stand for Solidarity, Hope, and Guts!

And yet, Bhurki Bai was not satisfied just by collectivizing women towards change. She knew that women's well-being was still a neglected cause.

When Seva Mandir announced a midwifery training course in Alsigarh, Bhurki Bai enrolled herself. “There were no ASHA workers in the village at that time. Women would not get themselves or their children vaccinated. So I learnt about midwifery to help them directly”, explains Bhurki Bai. She would accompany women to the hospital and even offer money, if needed. Then too, some villagers shamed her mobility and freedom. They would ask her husband why she went to Udaipur day and

night. Undaunted, Bhurki Bai was able to bring home better money and, equally significant, feel good about her work. The years of midwifery have eventually helped Bhurki Bai find employment at a government hospital in Udaipur.

She is also remembered in the village and Seva Mandir for her role in the restoration of the green cover of Alsigarh. Given the usual indifference people have towards common resources, this too required her sweat and toil. Bhurki Bai held many meetings with villagers to build their perspective on the protection of common land and forests. In collaboration with the Village Development Committee, she was able to develop 12 hectares of grazing land into a flower and vegetable nursery. This convinced villagers to plant trees in their 200 hectare community pasture land and create a boundary wall around it.

Bhurki Bai succeeded at yet another stint. At the Seva Mandir-run Women's Resource Centre, she also supported women facing domestic violence and built villagers' awareness against alcoholism. "Nobody spoke to women even when it was a case of violence against them! So I would go to the Jati Panchayat and the police station to present the woman's point of view. At the police station, they called me *Panch Bai* because feuding parties came to me instead of the police who expected bribes", shared Bhurki Bai.

Given her commendable body of work, it is not surprising that the village chose her as their Ward Panch. Bhurki Bai did not even have to campaign or fight the election. In her over three years in this position, she enabled social security linkages for residents, especially the most dispossessed. With her mediation, many poor families received social welfare grants to build a house or get hand pumps, and Alsigarh got a public toilet and a cemented road till Pipalvas.

In Seva Mandir's philosophy of development, communities must be strengthened to support themselves. Bhurki Bai snowballed this strength into ever-widening loops. Empowered rural women such as her have educated their children who are now proud parents of yet another generation of school-goers in Alsigarh.

Bhurki Bai looks at development in a similar, life-expanding vein. *"Hum log toh keede hain dharti mata ke. Hum toh chale jate hain, yeh hi yahan rahtin hain* (We humans are insects of mother earth. We humans depart, only she stays back). If only we humans could live by such wisdom.

Nurturing (Human) Nature



Kirtan Kumar Kasota, 59 Years
Garanvas, Jhadol

Our culture trains us to believe that private ownership – especially of land – is our best safety net for an uncertain future. This established logic becomes understandably defensible for the financially poor. In such 'private property' orthodoxy, to speak for collective ownership is counter-cultural and difficult, if not impossible. Kirtan, though, made it his life's mission and how. In over three decades at Seva Mandir, his repertoire of work shines with successes such as the first-ever community-owned forest land in Rajasthan and 38,514 hectares of community forests.

What makes such work more outstanding is that it is discourse-altering and value-shifting. Such work happens only after heart-minds are moved, from greed to generosity, fear to faith, conflict to collaboration.

Kirtan started this journey back in 1992, after Umed Mal Lodha, among others, picked him as a *Van Sahayak* (Forest Assistant) for Jhadol. Kirtan had completed his schooling, and had had a stint as a shop assistant and a school teacher. He also came from the most educated family in his village and, possibly, neighbouring villages. (Kirtan's father had studied till class X and read English, a rare feat in his day and place. A part-time farmer, he had worked for an NGO and was a well-respected elder of the village. This is why Kirtan and all his siblings – male and female – are educated). Kirtan was impressed by the work that Seva Mandir had been doing in his village via their Adult Literacy Centre since the mid-1980s. On his way home, he would drop in at the Centre to listen to their consciousness-raising songs and, sometimes, attend their meetings.

At Seva Mandir, Kirtan learnt its ethos and practice on the commons, forestry, and collective development. He first began awareness-raising work among the villagers of Khojawada. “On every visit to a village called Palia, I had to cross a water body on a rickety wooden boat. That was so scary but work had to be done”, recalls Kirtan. Once ashore, he counselled locals about forest protection, encouraged formation of informal forest protection committees, discouraged encroachment of forests, identified common pasture land, and planted trees. At his next stint in Bichiwada, he got the villagers of Bada Bhilwara and Shyampura to build boundaries on their respective 50 hectares and 37 hectares each of community forest land and plant trees from the 1,30,000 plant nursery that Seva Mandir had entrusted Kirtan with.

Since Kirtan had shown a quick learning curve, Seva Mandir sent him to the Gram Panchayat of Oda in 1996. There, in the village of Prada, its 18 hectare community pasture had long been encroached upon by five families.

The residents of Oda did not want to and could not tackle this knot. Kirtan started a process of deliberation among its 30 families, but people would either not turn up or not participate regularly. After much patience and perseverance, Kirtan was able to make a dent. He could convince villagers of the need to unite against the encroachment. “Initially, this created tensions between villagers. I was not seen favourably by the encroachers. They got angry. After about a year of negotiations, the encroachers had to agree and gave up the land”, shares Kirtan. He then also guided the villagers and their Panchayat through a maze of paperwork to apply for community forest rights.

Such successes boosted Kirtan's morale and interest in the work.

In the next few years, Kirtan's mediation skills were deployed to resolve a longstanding dispute in the village of Nevaj. There, a 45 hectare site of community pasture had been illegally possessed by a hand few of families. When Kirtan started to dialogue, 195 families joined hands to set up their community pasture. This led to a tug between the two factions. When the encroachers stayed adamant, Kirtan assisted the villagers in involving the Patwari (revenue official) in the matter. The encroachers relented. When the villagers started to wall the pasture, the encroachers struck again—at night, they would raze the wall that the villagers had built during the day.

Kirtan recalls some difficult and uplifting moments from this incident: “The encroachers saw me as the culprit and threatened to kill me. *Is Master ko hum goli maar denge*’ (We will shoot this Master). I was scared. They could have done it. Who knows?” (Kirtan was - and is - fondly called ‘Master’ by many in the villages of Jhadol, alluding both to his former role as a school teacher and his educator-counsellor duties at Seva Mandir).

Kirtan braved heavy emotions in village after village—accusation, anger, and what-about-ism. But he found ways to navigate.

“I stayed at the homes of families that were supportive and well-respected in the village. In Nevaj, the Rajput family of a former Sarpanch, Takhat Singh ji, hosted me. He even became my shield. When I was threatened, he said, 'First shoot me, then we will speak of the Master'. Kirtan and Takhat Singh sought help from the Police who nabbed the encroachers and put them behind bars for a few days. The village used that time to build the wall.

Takhat Singh is no more, but lives on in the fond memory of Kirtan and is now known to you, the reader. It is not often that one comes across such exemplars of comradeship across caste and rank, of liberal values and courage.

By now armed with polished negotiation and advocacy skills, Kirtan continued to identify potential community pasture sites and resolve conflicts around encroachments, such as in the villages of Oda (over 30 hectares) and Kakarmala (20 hectares). Wherever Kirtan built community pastures, Seva Mandir offered a plant nursery to the village and saplings for villagers' private land.

Simultaneously, the Jhadol of 1990s saw regular felling of trees and wood smuggling, despite the Joint Forest Management program of the State. To sensitize and alert villagers towards the protection of forests, Seva Mandir suggested that Kirtan facilitates the formation of *Van Suraksha Samitis* (Forest Protection Committees) that are registered with the Forest Department. In 1997, Kirtan started this committee-forming work in 100 villages of Jhadol.

In the years that followed, Seva Mandir and members of these committees recognized that the latter needed stronger credentials. By 2003, Kirtan enabled the creation of a Federation of all village-based Forest Protection Committees so as to fast-track their concerns to the block and

district level. Seva Mandir facilitated the registration of this new body - *Van Utthan Sansthan* (Forest Conservation Committee) - as a non-governmental organization under the Societies Act in 2002.

All this effort in organizing and strengthening people-led, village-based bodies proved valuable beyond anticipation.

By 2006, when the Forest Rights Act was approved, the people of Jhadol were gripped by a baffling situation. Kirtan explains this as : “For years, we had been urging villagers to collectivize so as to protect their forests. But they read the new law as a chance to seek private ownership of forest land through individual claims. And so they started to encroach upon forest land in the hope that their claims could be legalized. We at the Van Utthan Sansthan were worried and did not know how to respond to this development. Seva Mandir held a workshop to offer us an in-depth understanding of the Act. Then, we went to over 100 villages we worked with to explain the Act, its intent, and their responsibility”.

To widely broadcast the truth about the Act and halt encroachment, in 2009 Kirtan and the Van Utthan Sansthan organized a rally in Jhadol. The turnout of nearly 700 villagers far exceeded the expected number of 300. Villagers walked in silence, letting their placards speak of forests and the future. Walking through bazaars and intersections, they finally stopped at the office of the Sub Divisional Officer to hand him a petition for the Chief Minister to stop the wave of encroachments that the law had inadvertently triggered.

Between 2008 and 2009, Kirtan swung into campaign mode when a Government Order required that every village have its own Van Adhikar Samiti (Forest Rights Committee). To popularize this news and spur locals to act, Kirtan led mass advocacy among villagers so that they select their candidates with care. Once these Committees had been formed, Kirtan, his

peers, and Seva Mandir conducted workshops for representatives of nearly 100 Van Adhikar Samitis. Held at different sites of Jhadol, these offered knowledge and perspective about the law, its dynamics, as well as strategies for conflict resolution and forest protection. These workshops were also attended by officials from the Forest Department (such as the District Forest Officer and the Chief Conservator of Forests) as well as the Member of the Legislative Assembly from Phalasiya.

Acting on its principle that collective ownership of resources was a higher ethical position and more pragmatic, Seva Mandir proposed that villages claim community - not individual - forest rights. On consensus from the locals, Kirtan and the Van Utthan Sansthan painstakingly prepared 40 claims—one from each village for collective ownership of forest land. The then Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) was struck by this extraordinary demand. Among the many NGOs working on issues related to forests and the environment in South Rajasthan, only the Van Utthan Sansthan had asked for community forest rights. Kirtan remembers his response to the SDM: “We do not oppose individual land claims to forest land. In fact, we guide those who seek individual land titles. But we also think that individual ownership incites more demand for individual land. This is unsustainable. We encourage community titles so that an entire village can gain from a forest under its care”. Between 2012-2013, the SDM attended a few monthly meetings of the Van Utthan Sansthan to understand their rationale and, finally, supported their cause by dispatching their files to the next node in the administrative chain.

For the next four years, Kirtan and his team regularly followed up on the status of their claims but were met with silence.

To press the government into action, representatives of the Van Utthan Sansthan and Seva Mandir organised a *shanti jaloos* (peace rally) in the city

of Udaipur (on 12th February, the day of the Umed Mal Lodha awards). They handed the Commissioner a petition that urged the State to accelerate action on community forest rights.

Time ticked on and nothing changed.

In the meantime, community forest rights titles had been granted to some villages in the States of Odisha and Maharashtra. With support from Seva Mandir in 2012, a few members of the Van Utthan Sansthan travelled to the two States to understand their modalities.

In 2015, on Seva Mandir's proposal, Kirtan and team held a Press Conference in Udaipur to share with the media the story of their 40 community forest claims. They displayed trails of letters and receipts they had safely preserved all these years, and spoke of the social and ecological implications of people-owned forests as well as the environmental cost of the delays. For the next many days, the struggles of the Van Utthan Sansthan were well-featured in the local press.

The Forest Department had been prodded. Bundles of packed files started to arrive at the desks of officials in Jhadol—they had been tasked to determine community land holding and resolve pending claims.

In 2017, the first-ever 'community forest rights' awarded to eight villages in the State of Rajasthan were those of the Van Utthan Sansthan. In 2019, another nine Van Utthan Sansthan village sites won their community forest claims, and in 2022, two more such villages received their titles. By 2023, 75 villages from Jhadol got community rights to forests. Blocks other than Jhadol where Seva Mandir and Kirtan had applied for similar claims also received titles to community land (eight in Kotda, seven in Mavli, 11 in Kumbhalgarh, 12 in Gogunda, among others). As of the latest count, 296 villages with Van Utthan Sansthan have won titles to community forests.

What did these historic victories change for the locals and their forests?

In Kirtan's words, "Before community forest rights, villagers saw the forests as belonging to the government, even though they would secretly use its resources and even cut trees. But with community rights, they see the forests as their own and feel the need to look after them. In the village of Sultan ji ka Kherwada, two community forest sites were sanctioned. One of these, a 159 hectare site sanctioned in 2017-2018, was tree-less. The villagers waited for Seva Mandir to do something. We told them: we can show you the path, but you have to walk on it. We will stay right behind you. So, they approached the Forest Department that supported them with the building of its boundary wall and gave them 10,000 bundles of grass for plantation. The grass was harvested jointly by the villagers, including some from neighbouring villages. Finally, the harvested grass was valued at Rupees 12-15 lakhs. Each family involved in harvesting, including with those from the neighbouring villages, received 2,000 bundles of grass. A second community forest site of this village, of 155 hectares, was sanctioned in 2022-2023".

Hemraj Bhati, former General Secretary at Seva Mandir, speaks of the outsized role that Kirtan played in this lengthy struggle: "It is commendable that Kirtan created and sustained a committed cadre of citizens who stood by him as the Van Utthan Sansthan. This could not have been possible without his steady leadership and their tenacity as a team".

The splendid work by the Van Utthan Sansthan has been recognised by many besides the Umed Mal Lodha Trust. In 2010, it won the Raja Punja Award by the Maharana Mewar Foundation for their service to tribal people. The Government of India and the United Nations Development Programme inspected their Jhadol-based work; in 2012, they flew Kirtan, his female colleague Savita, and their Coordinator Kripa Shankar Joshi to Hyderabad for the India Biodiversity Award (which included one lakh

rupees) ceremony. In 2013, the Forest Department felicitated the Van Utthan Sansthan as a '*Van Mitra*' (Forest Friend).

This happy ending is not the end of this work, but a happy turn in it.

Kirtan and the Van Utthan Sansthan have discerned their next phase of work—enthuse villagers about their role in community forest management such as fair distribution of forest resources among all. The Van Utthan Sansthan also helps implement the Government's 2023 guideline on the creation of village-based Forest Management Committees. So far, they have helped 150 villages form these Committees and then guide them towards meaningful action. Kirtan and team also liaison with the government to grant budgets for these Committees. Van Utthan Sansthan and Seva Mandir have been tasked by the government to train and build capacities of members of the Forest Management Committees.

As the Coordinator of the Van Utthan Sansthan, Kirtan continues to stay as active as ever in 13 Panchayat Samitis and eight blocks where Seva Mandir facilitates environmental and forestry work such as Kherwada, Girwa, Kotda, Badgaon, Kumbhalgarh, Mavli, and others. With all this experience behind him, he is also contacted for advice by villages that are yet to understand the law and claim their community forest rights.

Even on weekends when he gets to visit his family, fellow villagers seek his counsel for conflict resolution and mediation. Kirtan shared: "I and my fellow villagers of Garanvas have been able to curb wasteful expense and public nuisance at weddings and festivals. Loud music, liquor, and celebrations beyond sunset are prohibited in our village. This has put an end to drunken revelry and violence. All festivity is restricted to sunlight hours".

Given this spectrum of change that Kirtan and the Van Utthan Sansthan have catalyzed, one imagines that he lives with a sense of content. Not really. He seems to inhabit the moment between the present and the

future, wishing that human-forest kinship involves less conflict, more peace.

30-year-old Roshan Lal Meena, a former colleague of Kirtan, offers hope. “I am now training to be a teacher but I miss working for forests. That work is close to my heart and will always be. If I get a chance to do it again, I will”.

Here is a young man from Jhadol, groomed and eager to stand by their forests. Thankfully, the fruit does not fall from the tree.

Singing Kabir, Talking Women's Lib



Leela Devi Meena, 42 Years
Lathuni, Dharavan Panchayat, Jhadol

1988. Amliya village, Jhadol. A sprightly five-year-old girl would walk with her Uncle in the faint glow of a lamp he held. They made their way to his nightly Adult Literacy Class, run by Seva Mandir. The little girl was the only child among the grown-ups who overlooked her intrusion because she was a keen student. For two odd years, she regularly attended those 9 PM classes, and even managed to clear a test! Her enthusiasm prompted her father to enrol her in a government school. There too, she was the minority—as one of the only two girls among the all-male students. Alas, the girl could study only till class 10; her father, like others in the community, did not allow a young daughter much mobility.

But this girl - Leela Devi - had an unstoppable wish to learn.

And so she found other avenues. This time, she started walking with her mother – a Ward Panch – to meetings organized by Seva Mandir. Leela recalls, “At those meetings, I learnt about the development of the village, afforestation, and so on. These matters became a part of my young self”. So enthused was she by developmental work that she participated in a plantation drive organized by Seva Mandir in Amliya. When someone objected to her - an adolescent - attendance in these meetings, young Leela slipped into a sari to look older!

Leela had another early induction—this one into the inner world via the mystic Kabir, the spiritual guru of tribals in the area. Her family and many others in the region are devotees of Kabir.

Unknown to Seva Mandir and Leela herself, a young woman's journey to social awakening had jump-started in Amliya. Yet, like in all journeys, this one had a turn.

Leela was married as a teenager. This put an end to her association with Seva Mandir. Her new home was in the village of Lathuni, Jhadol. To young Leela, the life of home-keeping felt stifling for she was used to serving more than just her family. The values that Seva Mandir had instilled in her had started to stir up.

When 20-year-old Leela came to know of timber theft from the forest in the village, she decided to take action. Leela mobilized villagers who had turned a blind eye to the plunder of natural resources. She convinced them that since the forest was their common heritage, it must be guarded. As a result, she and a few villagers managed to catch camel-bound thieves and their haul. This initiative by Leela put an end to the destruction of the dense forest cover of Lathuni.

Since each brave step can light the way to the next one, Leela did not look back.

She decided to build herself a new house, to get a little independence from her in-laws. With help from her husband, Leela hauled stone, mud, and wood over weeks before the mud house was complete. Right in the centre of the new house, Leela pitched a white flag, a symbol of Kabir.

She started to attend public meetings of the Gram Sabha (the general assembly of all voters in a village) to learn about the social landscape of Lathuni. At one such meeting in 2005, when Leela heard that there was no educated woman in the village to take up the work of ASHA Sahyogini, she applied and got selected.

The role was just up her sleeve. Leela had to visit women and children, and inform them about nutrition, contraception, and so on. Over the next few years, Leela was able to transform women's experience of reproductive health, pregnancy, and child deliveries. Among her other achievements, nearly all women in the area started to use contraceptive methods and hospital-based deliveries, markedly improving their health parameters.

Such bravado often comes at a cost. Leela had to pay for it too.

Her husband found it difficult to accept her daily mobility and public life. Once, when she reached home late in the evening, he locked her out of the house. Leela broke the lock and reminded him that he had no right to question her work since he too enjoyed such liberty (as a migrant worker in another city). Besides, she argued, the house belonged to her too, for she had put in her sweat to build it. Her husband understood that Leela was not just his wife and mother to their two children, but an individual with commitments that he ought to respect.

Leela though did not see herself just as an ASHA worker. Coloured by Seva Mandir's vision for the village, she would also attend development-

related meetings in the village. It was at one of these that she heard about Seva Mandir's new office near Lathuni.

In 2019, Seva Mandir organized its first meeting in the area. Leela was – yet again – the only woman in that meeting. Given her passion for social work, Leela was chosen to serve the people of Dharavan and Lathuni as, first, the Treasurer of the Village Development Committee (facilitated by Seva Mandir) and then as an Agricultural Para-Worker. Her job required her to form women's Self Help Groups (SHGs), look after the nutrition of women and children, distribute seeds, teach optimized farming techniques, afforestation, water and soil conservation, and so on.

Leela outdid her brief, although it was anything but easy.

Men would not allow their girls and women to step out. Leela recalls chiding them: “I have worked here for a decade. My husband comes home only thrice a year. I am always attending public meetings, but no one has kidnapped me so far and I have not run away. How can your women be harmed?”

To the women, Leela offered her own example: “My husband questions me about the money he gives me. I do not like that. I cannot buy something for myself. When I started earning and had my own money, I did not have to ask him for money and got more respect from him. No matter how rich the husband is, if the woman does not have her own money, she is her slave. She has to wash his clothes, do his dishes, obey him. And she gets little respect from him”.

Hundreds of conversations later, many repeated again and again across the 500 odd families of Lathuni, Leela managed to enrol 350 women in the Seva Mandir-facilitated SHGs and form 33 SHG groups. Women have used their savings to buy sewing machines, water pumps, and such like. Leela also used the SHG meetings to talk about women's health, domestic

violence, girls' education, anicut and cattle shed construction, and other such vital matters. Impressed by the outcomes of these SHGs, women from the neighbouring village of Tindori asked Leela to set up a women's savings group there.

Jhalam Chand, Team Leader of Van Utthan Sansthan (Forest Conservation Committee) and a colleague of Leela Devi, has much to say about her role in forest conservation. "Between 2007 and 2008, over a decade before she even became a Volunteer at Seva Mandir, Leela Devi was saving the forests of her area. In the villages of Dharavan and Lathuni, forest and pasture land had been encroached. Villagers would steal stones from forests or cause forest fires. Villagers and the Forest Department would not see eye-to-eye over the collection of Mahua flowers. Leela Devi would meet villagers, Panchayat leaders, and other influential people to enthuse them about the value of forests. Caught in their daily pursuits, villagers paid little attention to Leela and officials from the Forest Department would not take our work seriously. She would call for meetings but they did not turn up. There were no mobile phones then, so all communication involved walking to people's homes and offices. But Leela did not give up. Each of these violations of the forest took a long and hard battle to cease. As a woman, it was tougher. Villagers would gossip about her mobility. A woman sharing the *jajam* (literally, rug; means sitting together as equals) with men was a spectacle. But Seva Mandir enabled it and Leela did it".

Over the years, Leela's presence in the area has also worked as deterrence against child marriage and child labour. Public meetings see greater participation by women. At Seva Mandir's Women Resource Centre in the Panchayat of Dharavan, women have started to report cases of domestic violence. She has publicly questioned men who sit in the chair of their Sarpanch wives at meetings and has called out the wrongdoing of the Village Sarpanch.

Many see Leela's work as unnecessary fuss. Yet, an unflustered Leela continues to strive.

She helped rescue a 15-year-old girl who had been abducted on her way back from school. While men from the community told the family to accept the girl's abduction because “she will marry someday and leave home anyway”, Leela took the matter to the Police and helped file a case. The girl was brought back and Leela ensured that she was enrolled in school.

In 2022, after 28-year-old Geeta (an SHG member from Dharavan) lost her husband, her marital family tried to throw her out of the house. Geeta reached out to Leela who counselled her in-laws and got the Police to intervene. Thanks to Leela's actions, the family accepted Geeta. On Leela's advice, Geeta also managed to get her name included in the family's land records. Leela is also trying to find Geeta a job in the village.

Kripa Shankar Joshi (Seva Mandir's Block Coordinator, Jhadol) draws attention to what he most admires about Leela Devi—her courage to assert herself within the marital family. “For women, the family is the strongest hurdle to cross over into public roles. Leela Devi is an example for girls and women in the area”.

For Leela, all change begins at home.

Both her children – son and daughter – study in a residential school and lead rather un-gendered lives at home: “My son washes his own clothes. He has to share all the domestic chores that my daughter does, including fetching water on the head. My husband's cooking is excellent. The *rotis* I make never swell, but all his *rotis* do. When we have guests at home, he makes the *rotis*. My son makes A-one *kbichdi*”.

Every morning, Leela hits the muddy path outside her house to start her daily, several kilometre-long walk to homes, offices, and meetings. The

dense green jungle has streams she crosses and snakes she dodges. At night, she waters the family farm where she grows vegetables, lentils, and grain.

She won the Umed Mal Lodha Environment Award (in 2022), and is also invited by local schools as a Guest of Honour and has been recognized by the Government for her stellar performance as an ASHA worker. Leela captures the essence of her success through the lens of Seva Mandir, *“Bachpan se, Seva Mandir se ghar se nikalna seekha, public mein bolna seekha, wahan se mazbooti aayi ”* (Since my childhood, Seva Mandir taught me how to step out of the house, to speak in public, to be strong)”.

In her private time, Leela indulges herself in another source of joy and meaning—jamming on Kabir. She recites and sings Kabir, at times with a group of singers who travel across villages. So deeply does Leela value the privilege of her socio-political awakening that she insists on sharing this gift with others.

Like Kabir, like Leela. Rebel reformers.

Grace in Struggle



Devi Lal, 56 Years
Amivada village, Jhadol

Most of us see 'love' as person-to-person—a feeling one has for another. Most of us give – our attention, money, and effort – to persons we love, whom we see as our 'own'. Very few of us can see love as more than person-al. For very few of us love is Love—eclectic and expansive. These few can Love – generously and steadily – a cause, and that too a public one. This story is about such Love, about *mazdoor*-farmer-leader Devi Lal.

He pauses working on the boundary wall of a community pasture in Amivada to recall a truncated childhood spent walking from his Amivada home to his Bichiwada school (eight kilometers). While the distance could not be shortened, his education was cut short when his father died. 12-year-old Devi Lal had to drop out of school and thrust himself into manual labour. Together with his mother and elder sister, he joined Amivada's labour force that travelled 60 kilometers to Udaipur to work and eat that day. An entire day's work fetched Devi Lal Rupees 10, a sum that would mostly be over with the day.

During that bleak period, around 1983, Devi Lal heard that an organization (Seva Mandir) had started adult literacy classes in his village. Keen to do better, he was early to enrol as a student and, eventually, early to transition to being a teacher. Among other villagers who took to learning at the Literacy Centre was his elder brother Waqat Ram. The brothers had not realised then that their literacy would be a portal to wider horizons as community mobilisers.

Of the bigger roles that Devi Lal and other teacher-mobilisers were called to play was of consciousness-raising among villagers. An attractive way to do this, Seva Mandir figured, was to organize mass, annual gatherings they named *Apna Mela*. So, every 8th of September (Literacy Day) for a few years starting 1985, around 500 people – children and adults, men and women – would gather at the headquarters of the Jhadol tehsil. They walked for kilometres from many a village across Jhadol and Kotra to be there. These two-day long events were charged with the beats of drums, local songs, and slogans for literacy and against the cutting of trees. There were cultural events (arranged by the West Zone Cultural Center), sports contests, and group discussions on the themes of self-governance and development. Respected social and environmental activists such as Anil

Agarwal, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Kishore Saint, Anil Agarwal, Kamla Chowdhury, Komal Kothari, among others participated in *Apna Mela* as Chief Guests.

Devi Lal, his young bride Alku Devi, and Waqat Ram would canvass villagers in Amivada and neighbouring villages to participate. Waqat Ram recalls this time as, “*10 ko bulate the, 15 log aa jate the*” (We would invite 10, 15 would turn up). These rallies, it was hoped, would leave a mark on local sensibilities.

It certainly did for Devi Lal.

When Seva Mandir proposed that villagers form a *Gram Vikas Samooh* (Village Development Committee) to collectively reflect and act, Devi Lal was keen. Villagers rightly picked him to be its first Secretary. Amazingly, Devi Lal has held that post for over 20 years now—Amivada would not have anyone else except him, thanks to his dedication and their trust. With an 11 member team on his side, Devi Lal and Seva Mandir took up their first big project in Amivada—revival of their community pasture land. The first fix needed by this 18 hectare land was its encroachment by 15 people from the neighbouring village of Toorgarh. With counsel from Seva Mandir, Devi Lal led a several months' long process of deliberation and negotiation. When the encroachers refused to give up, members of the Village Development Committee felt forced to up the ante. They engaged a *patwari* (land record official) to specify ownership and also contacted the police. After a year of delays and interventions, Amivada finally got possession of its first collectively-owned pasture land.

Men and women from the village teamed up with members of the Village Development Committee to restore the land. With support from Seva Mandir, they dug trenches, planted thousands of Bamboo and other trees, and gave the plot a boundary wall.

The true feat of this episode was a rare emergence—the idea of comradeship for community-led development.

Over the next decade, immersion in such work brought Devi Lal clarity about his path in life and role in the village. Encouraged by fellow villagers, Devi Lal felt ready to take lead in local governance. And so he fought and won the elections for Ward Panch (and, subsequently, for two more terms), and was also elected the Vice-President of the Gram Panchayat once.

As the chosen representative of his Panchayat and the Village Development Committee, Devi Lal is said to have piloted many community-based projects with earnest passion. In his words, “I did not and do not differentiate between a government project, a Seva Mandir project, and a Panchayat project. For me, all are crucial if they benefit people in the village.”

By the year 2018, thousands of those Bamboo saplings planted on the 18 hectare community pasture land were ready to be harvested. This was the next big agenda for Devi Lal and his team. However, the Forest Department would not permit either their cutting or sale. In the ten years since the Forest Rights Act had been passed, not a single claim for community forests resource had been approved.

When members of the Village Development Committee raised this issue with Seva Mandir, Priyanka Singh (then CEO of Seva Mandir), Devi Lal, and his team met the Collector of Udaipur and the highest officials of the Forest Department, with a specific plea that the village panchayat of Amivada be allowed to harvest their Bamboo plantation. This too came to a naught. On the other hand, time was ticking by.

If not harvested soon, thousands of Bamboo trees would have lost their commercial value. For the villagers of Amivada, this implied a waste of ten years' worth of care and maintenance of the Bamboo plantation. With no

official sanction in sight and no hope of receiving it, the villagers convened at the Jhadol-based office of Seva Mandir to deliberate on their response to the breach of trust by the Forest Department. They decided to double down.

In their pursuit of truth, Devi Lal and villagers planned to start a Gandhian *satyagraha* (insistence on truth) to express their disquiet at the dereliction by the Forest Department. They pledged to peacefully harvest the Bamboo plantation and calmly face any punitive action this may attract. Prior to the date of harvest, Devi Lal and colleagues informed the local administration and issued a press statement about their intent and action. Permission to harvest the bamboo grove arrived on the day of the harvest and the *satyagraha* – 20 February 2018 – when over 400 people from 15 villages as well as a team from Seva Mandir gathered at the community pasture land.

Together, villagers cut thousands of Bamboo trees and loaded them in two trucks that left for the government's wood godown at Swaroopganj, about 100 kilometers away. On their way, the trucks were stopped at a few points by officials from the Police and the Forest Department. Seva Mandir intervened to explain the context to these officials and then the trucks were allowed to ply. Finally, at the gate of the godown, the truck and the villagers were disbarred from entering. Devi Lal and his team members spent a sleepless and anxious night by the truck outside the godown, while Seva Mandir negotiated on their behalf with the government. On the second day of this holdup, the truck was finally allowed in. At long last, the sale of the Bamboo earned villagers over one lakh rupees that they deposited in their *Gram Vikas Kosh* (Village Development Fund).

Able led by Devi Lal and steered by Seva Mandir, this incident encapsulates peoples' innate Love for justice and peace, their shared labour, and its sweet fruit. Priyanka Singh shines a light on the spirit behind this

fight: “There are two pieces to this. One, the effort by villagers to protect the community pasture lands for a decade, during which they grew and nurtured the Bamboo plantation. Two, their patient perseverance around equitable distribution. They could have turned a blind eye to the Bamboo plantation. Or, they could have decided to secretly cut the Bamboo and take a few stumps each. They did not have to sweat it out for permissions. But they chose not to take that path. This is what makes it remarkable. Collective decision-making is rarely a clear ‘yes’ or a clear ‘no’. It takes moral authority and solidarity around truth to make something like a *satyagraha* happen. This is where people such as Devi Lal became instrumental as the *Adhyaksh* (Chairperson) of the Gram Vikas Samooch. The centre piece for me is this long, arduous journey of truth and common good.”

Days after the sale of that Bamboo, four vehicles packed with villagers from Kotda came to Amivada to listen to this story and take away lessons for their own quandaries. The Amivada *satyagraha* became local folklore; till this day, it continues to be told again and again.

Ajay Singh Mehta, Former Chief Executive of Seva Mandir, delves into what the *satyagraha* symbolized for him: “I see it not as a protest by a single village, but as a collective response to the rupture of trust by the administration and the Forest Department. Systematically, they did not honour their policy commitments to local communities. Devi Lal and friends in Amivada sublimated their deep disquiet, if not destructive impulses, into a nonviolent force for years of constructive work”.

Devi Lal himself speaks little. That little is about the work done by the Village Development Committee. He does not figure in his narration of the work. And so, others from the village chip in to fill the gaps.

Among the many who have closely observed Devi Lal's nearly 40 years of practice – consciousness raising around rural development – is 46 year old

Sapna Kunwar. When in her early twenties, Sapna stepped on the 'social service' path as a volunteer for a women's self-help group facilitated by Seva Mandir in Amivada. She had felt sparked by the values and practice that Seva Mandir brought to the village, but she was the daughter-in-law of a conservative Rajput family.

By and by, the spark grew and Sapna was able to drop her inhibitions and her *ghoonghat* (veil). She made village development the mainstay of her life and has since come a long, hard way to be a well-known activist of Amivada and the Director of a local NGO. This flight of hers is, to a degree, a reflection of the collective dream that Devi Lal inspired. "Devi Lal ji and the *Gram Vikas Samooh* have worked on other issues that people face. Like, the woman who was being beaten by her alcoholic husband. When she left him for her parents' house, the husband came to the women's self-help group for support. We counselled him and he promised us that he will not raise his hand on her. Devi Lal ji and his team at the *Gram Vikas Samooh* and some of us women from the self-help group hired a taxi to go to the woman's natal house, assured her of our support, and brought her back. When villagers collect, such abuse can be tackled".

The Village Development Committee is currently working to develop its second community pasture land spread over nine hectares. Devi Lal, his wife, daughter-law, and brother are among others who are at work at this site. Despite all this progress, Devi Lal betrays a hint of concern: "The young generation of Amivada is more educated than ever. But I wonder if the community lands we worked so hard for will stay after our generation is gone. I keep telling our young ones to be involved in social work, to know how public work happens. I say to them: you must make this better or at least keep it as it is. Do not let these pastures and forests disappear".

This fear of Devi Lal may be legitimate—it is the fear of love overshadowing Love. After all, very few of us can walk the path from literacy to education, education to wisdom, and wisdom to deed.

Guard Forests, Not Women



Santosh Kunwar Bhati, 43 Years
Udaipur

“If possible, go away and do not come back. Your daughters will die of hunger here.” A neighbour said this to a pregnant Santosh while handing her 20 Rupees as bus fare. Santosh clutched the money and her two toddler daughters, and boarded a bus to Udaipur. Over 20 years later, the walls of her Udaipur home reveal a rather different story. They hold her many awards and photographs of her post-graduate daughters and colleague-friends. This difference between what her history is and what the walls tell also appears as tears and giggles that intersperse Santosh's

narration of her one life, two lifetime—a before and an after, the dark simmered in trauma and nurturing female friendship, and the bright in effort and nerve.

Today, Santosh is a Forest Guard for the Government of Rajasthan since 2016. On recruitment, at age 34, she was taught to plant a nursery as well as to fire guns (or, nurture and fight) and then posted at the Mewar Biodiversity Park as its first female Forest Guard. At the 165 hectare Park, her task was to orient visitors – children and adults – to protect the forest ecosystem. She also had to guard the forest from harm by motivating local villagers to be its citizen-guardians.

Santosh brought to work a friendly-yet-firm ethic, even as it made her unpopular among some. She put this as: “I was strict with visitors, no matter who they were. I strongly urged even those who pulled rank to follow rules like not carrying plastic, food, and cigarettes to the Park. But I am pained to say that as children, parents or teachers, we are unaware of and disinterested in our physical environment”.

Eager to make a dent in public apathy, Santosh fostered comradeship with local villagers – especially youth and women – who lived at the edge of the Park. In time, she ingrained in them a sense of care towards the forest, interest in its rhythms, and a kinship with trees, soil, and water. As members of the Forest Department's Forest Protection Group, this cadre stood by Santosh at critical moments. As an example, they helped prevent and fight the fires that would flame up the dry, grassy pockets of the forest each summer. And, when sandalwood thieves slipped into the forest under the cover of the night, they shadowed Santosh so she could nab them red-handed.

Her former colleagues speak of her with awe and admiration. Assistant Forester Rajeshwari Rathore shared her impression of the efforts made by

Santosh: “At the Biodiversity Park, Santosh handled school children and rowdy elements with equal ease. She is perceptive and articulate, and this brought her praise from the public and her seniors. Santosh would never shirk difficult tasks such as night patrols. Be it men who lurk in the forest to brew country liquor or to mine, she would directly confront them, even alone. Once, she chased sandalwood thieves at night. They threw stones but she stayed put and handed them over to the Police. She is fearless.” Range Officer Dilip Gujjar said that Santosh is a role model for women and foresters alike.

In other ways too, Santosh did more than was expected from her. With pebbles, she managed to teach basic math to unschooled young women from the local village; later, they found work at the ticket counter of the Biodiversity Park.

Within three years of such service at the Park, Santosh was recognized for her dedication through a series of awards, such as by the Forest Department, the Umed Mal Lodha Trust, besides others. These were followed by a string of interviews and features in the media, including by the French edition of the international women's magazine *Marie Claire*.

All this public attention was apparently for Santosh-the-Forest Guard, but in reality it also honoured the trail that got Santosh to the awards. A long and hard trail.

A key turning point on the trail was over 20 years back when that kind neighbour of Santosh told her to “go away” from her life of torture and hunger in the village. Santosh was in an abusive marriage then. She had been pulled out of school (at grade six, age 16) and married to an unemployed man who was 12 years older. She wanted to leave and tried, but had no other home. As a girl, she had faced neglect by her natal family. Once married,

Santosh was expected to endure her circumstance. This is why that neighbour of hers, a witness to the ordeals of Santosh, offered her advice and money so that she, her daughters, and the unborn child could escape and survive.

Santosh drew deep from the wells of her spirit and left for her natal city of Udaipur.

There, with love and support from her *Nani* (maternal grandmother), she started to scrape a living as a domestic worker. This change was very painful and tough, but Santosh had no choice. She stayed on this trail till it became unsafe. To escape predatory men she encountered in the privacy of home-based work, she quit. With the responsibility of little children and much uncertainty, Santosh battled deep despair till she found a new cleaning job at the Guest House of Seva Mandir in 2006.

“Joining there has been the best decision of my life. I saw how confident the female workers of Seva Mandir were. They were supportive, and suggested that I re-start my education but I laughed it off. I felt solace at work but the future seemed frightful. When the news of my husband's death reached me, I felt shattered. I had hoped he would improve, but the news made me feel more alone. And I was expected to live as a Rajput widow, in *purdah*, at home. But my colleague-friends helped me see better. Marissa and Dodie, two foreign volunteers who lived at the Seva Mandir Guest House then, opened a bank account for me. For years and years, they deposited money for my daughters' education and their marriages. My three daughters have had three mothers—me, Marissa, and Dodie”.

Santosh felt assured about her daughters' future. But her female colleague-friends at Seva Mandir wanted more for her. Their care and persuasion finally convinced Santosh to re-start school education. After a gap of 12 years, Santosh picked up text books. For the next few years, she

juggled her day job with coaching for school and childcare. There was a time when Santosh and one of her daughters appeared for the same class X examination.

It was an exhausting life but it felt worth living. Santosh and her daughters were lodged in a circle of love and purpose.

When Santosh completed her school education, her colleague-friends at Seva Mandir gifted her a laptop to encourage her to study further. And she did—Santosh completed her graduation. But her circle at Seva Mandir would not rest. They would bring to her applications for jobs that matched her evolving potential.

One such application was for a Forest Guard, a government job. Without any confidence that she could get selected, Santosh filled it at the behest of her colleague-friends, on the last date of submission. Certain that she would not make it, Santosh did not check the result. Startled when the selection letter arrived, she went to the interview in the dress she had worn as a child—a Rajput *poshaak* (blouse, skirt, and stole). The interviewer quizzed her about working in the male-dominated forest department. “Rajput women are not supposed to walk ahead of men. How will you do this job?”, Santosh was asked.

By then, traditional attire covered only the physical body of Santosh, not her inner element which had outgrown the mandates of culture and patriarchy. Her confident response confirmed this transformation as well as her selection as a Forest Guard.

After ten years at Seva Mandir, eight years as a forest Guard, and much acclaim in between, Santosh is far from satisfied today: “You can hear people say 'Save Forests', 'Honour Women'. But do they? These are slogans. In reality, our public neither truly honours women nor our forests. I have seen it

first-hand, as a woman and as a Forest Guard. When will society change its attitude towards both?” Regardless of doubts or perhaps because of those, Santosh rides a scooter, dressed in a shirt and pants, to her new station at the Uday Nivas forest where she continues to oversee the forests and educate the public about the environment.

As her narration draws to a close, Santosh makes a request: *“Aap yeh zaroor likhna ki main bhooli nabin hoon ki Seva Mandir mera peehar hai, meri Ma hai. Woh meri jad, aur main uski ek shaakha”* (Please write that I have not forgotten that Seva Mandir is my natal family, my mother. It is my root, and I am its branch).

The Gentle Revolutionary



Ramlal Pargi, 69 Years
Medi village, Kotra

As a child, Ramlal had once caught a poisonous snake, awed hundreds of villagers with it at a local fair, and released the snake back in the river. As a leftist teenager, he rallied thousands of peasants with *Inquilab Zindabad* (long live the revolution) against a predatory landlord. As an adult, Ramlal joined Seva Mandir and together they led unprecedented development in remote Kotra.

It seems as if all along, Ramlal had nourished a dream for the well-being of his community and devised ways to be its bearer. Perhaps Ramlal was trying to counter the material deprivation of his childhood by building his

skills and courage. Becoming an adolescent apprentice to a snake charmer *sadhu* (ascetic), for example, was not really to entertain villagers, but to learn herbal cures of snake bite and treat villagers who had long been killed by it. What he really wanted was to feel bold and worthy. Likewise, after he joined a left political party in Kotra, he steered his comrades to end the reign of terror by a powerful feudal; they also halted (Teak and Mahua) smuggling from local forests. After this stint in politics, Ramlal found himself another canvass—Seva Mandir.

In 1986, when Seva Mandir was looking for a teacher for their first Adult Literacy Centre in his village of Medi, Ramlal got selected. His experience with community work made up for his incomplete schooling. Ramlal enjoyed teaching and also relished the cultural gigs that Seva Mandir organized. All night bhajan recitals and even dancing hooked villagers to both the form and message of collectivisation for development. Ramlal added to this vibrancy by writing and singing poems in Mewari and Gujarati—he sang of the misery of excessive drinking, the joys of solidarity among villagers, among others.

Such was his charisma that Ramlal's siblings too got pulled towards his work. Among the many students at the Adult Literacy Centre was his sister, Moden. She learnt basic math and alphabets at the Centre and practiced daily at home. Eventually, Moden was sought after by villagers to write letters, fill forms, and so on. Like her brother, Moden would easily break into song, and was enthusiastic about public development. Eventually, she became a teacher at another Seva Mandir-facilitated Adult Literacy Centre and is credited for giving Medi its first cohort of literate girls and women. Moden is no more but her imprint is evident among Medi's educated residents who are her contemporaries and their children.

Hemraj Bhati, Former General Secretary, Seva Mandir, recalls Moden with admiration, “Those days, it was unusual and even risky for women to step into public roles, attend all-male meetings, and to speak up. But she did all that, then ran an *aanganwadi*³ in the village, and also helped her brother form the first women's collective of Medi”.

Over the years, Ramlal's reputation as a dedicated worker grew and so did the profile of his work. By 1987, he was the Supervisor of a few Adult Literacy Centres. Later, he also coordinated a library for Seva Mandir, going door-to-door to offer books, newspapers, and magazines to literate villagers, and reading aloud news and stories to the unschooled. Every month, Ramlal also organized a collective program – a play or a musical evening – to raise awareness in the community about issues such as health, savings, forests, and so on. In his final stint at Seva Mandir, Ramlal worked on agriculture by distributing seeds, planting vegetable nurseries, and convincing villagers to turn to organic farming.

Throughout his 35 years of work in Kotra, Ramlal broke new ground.

In the village of Nakalo, for example, villagers came together for the first time to safeguard 60 hectares of community land by building a boundary wall around it, and then planting and caring for about 1,000 plants. At an inter-village dispute between illegal occupants and rightful owners of a 200 hectare of land, Ramlal mobilized villagers to slowly ease the situation and create its boundary. He is also credited for having halted the theft of forest trees—in an incident still etched in the memory of his contemporaries, Ramlal is said to have stopped a truck carrying stolen wood from the forest. Showing exemplary courage, he made the driver empty the truck and called police and forest officials to the spot.

³ A rural childcare and mothercare center in India, established by the government to combat child hunger and malnutrition.

Ramlal's zeal also inspired others to join him in such missions.

When he started a dialogue with the encroachers of community land in the village of Koldara, he was joined by Jhelki Devi, a resident of that village and a member of Aastha Sansthan, a feminist, women's rights organization. Passionate about social work, she mobilized many women supporters for the cause. Thanks to this collective pressure, the occupants had to vacate the land. Ramlal facilitated the creation of a boundary wall around the land and planted trees and shrubs there. This collaboration between Ramlal and Jhelki Devi, and therefore Seva Mandir and Aastha Sansthan, is a precious example of solidarity across organizations for common cause.

By the year 2000, Ramlal's impressive graph of work and commitment led him to be chosen as the Chairperson of the Village Development Committee. He leveraged this position to maximise development for the village. "At that time, there was barely any State intervention in this region. Most development work in our villages was done by Seva Mandir. We built channel lines and check dams across a five kilometre stretch! There were either no anicuts or dysfunctional anicuts here, so we made new ones that are still in use today. At Seva Mandir, our work does not come to an end after we have built something. Our goal is to maintain it and even upgrade it, if need be", said Ramlal.

For the first time, Medi also got a community hall that could be used by villagers for local events. Ramlal enabled Seva Mandir's lift irrigation and watershed project; this helped raise the level of water in many villages in Kotra.

But, since work – and life itself – is never without challenges, Ramlal has had his share too. "When Seva Mandir decided to repair old wells and dig new wells in the village, everyone wanted a well for themselves. This created a difficult situation for me. Those who did not get one were upset with me.

With a lot of patience, I had to make them understand the situation and keep their faith in me and our work”.

It is this - Ramlal's interpersonal skills - that made possible one of his finest achievements in public life, one that he is most remembered for. A lentil mill of and in the village!

Lentil farmers of the area were a troubled lot. They had to haul all their produce to the neighbouring State of Gujarat or to Udaipur to process it. This was not only cumbersome because of scarce public transport but also expensive; finally, it was not even worth the effort because lentil did not sell for a fair price there. To ease this situation, the Village Development Committee and Seva Mandir discussed possible solutions. One of these was to build a lentil mill, as an asset of the village, and for the collective use of lentil farmers. However, this required lentil farmers to shift their thought and practice, to see themselves as a collective and not as individual lentil farmers. This was an antithesis to convention. It was here that Ramlal played the most influential role—he managed to convince farmers of the virtues of common ownership and collective work.

The next challenge was a piece of common land that could be used for the mill. Villagers found one such space but it was encroached upon. When Ramlal and members of the Village Development Committee approached the encroacher, he refused to let go. Ramlal and his team tried negotiations over a period of time during which Ramlal was even beaten up by the encroacher. Not one to give up, Ramlal got the *Patwari* (revenue official) and the Sarpanch involved in the matter till it got resolved. Thanks to his dedication and the guidance of Seva Mandir, the lentil mill was constructed. Seva Mandir also helped farmers open up lentil collection centres at the villages of Mamer, Chikhla, and Mahadi. All this proved very helpful—lentil was processed in the village and sold at a better price.

Ramlal peppers these anecdotes with names of all those who made such good work possible. His face lights up as he speaks of his colleague Bhagirath Meena, Program Associate, Natural Resource Development. “He was so earnest in his work that if villagers would not plant the seeds that he so passionately distributed, he would hire a machine to do the job. He had personally planted so many of the mango and gooseberry trees you see in the village. I was always so impressed by his enthusiasm. He even helped take our farm produce all the way to Udaipur city to sell it. He also trained many villagers such as me in making vermicompost and organic manure”.

Development work so occupied Ramlal that he bypassed marriage for over a decade. By local convention, Ramlal married rather late—in his early thirties. And yet, even his personal life reflects his public associations. He named his daughters after countries - America, Germany, Italy, and so on - to express his gratitude to the many foreigners who befriended and helped Ramlal. They were volunteers at Seva Mandir, and had lived and worked with him in the village. But, it is not just his daughters who bear a mark of Ramlal's devotion to the social. After he retired from active work, his wife, Phooli Bai, stepped into his shoes as the Secretary of the Village Development Committee and manages the *Gram Vikas Kosh* (Village Development Fund). Bhagirath Meena recalls how she and Ramlal persuaded many in different villages to grow vegetable nurseries in order to supplement their income and nutrition, instead of buying expensive seedlings from Gujarat.

In all of the above narration of his life, Ramlal never mentioned his disability—he was struck by Polio as a child. Perhaps he skipped it because he never let it – the disability and its challenges – come in the way of his work. And so, as in Ramlal's life, so in Ramlal's portrait—disability is not the pivot of this tribute to him, and yet it makes his work all the more pivotal.

Stream Becomes River



Madan Lal Bhil, 47 Years

Raud ka Gudha village, Kumbhalgarh

Poverty, disease, death, illiteracy, superstition. This is how Madan Lal remembers his childhood in the Bhil cluster of his village in the 1980s. It pained him that of all the communities in Raud ka Gudha, it was his folks - the Bhils - who lagged in matters of well-being. To overcome this disquiet, adolescent Madan Lal dreamt of joining the Indian Army. He worked hard to clear the entrance exam. But, as they say, life had other plans. Madan Lal's father firmly objected to his son's choice of joining the Army, lest his son be harmed. Madan Lal was

heartbroken: he could neither disobey his father, nor escape that disquiet he felt about his community.

Heart breaks can at times tear the heart so wide open that our horizons alter. For Madan Lal, it churned his consciousness. He started to feel fired about changing the dismal situation of his community.

And so, Madan Lal began a new chapter of his life—public service. At 19 years of age, he enrolled 20 Bhil children in school. By his twenties, in 1996, he ran nightly reading, writing, and arithmetic classes for illiterate Bhil men and women. When word spread about this service, the District Collector dropped in and even tested the reading and writing skills of Madan Lal's students. The official left so impressed that he sent Madan Lal a formal letter of appreciation. This validation meant a lot for Madan Lal because his venture was unique. He was driven by the dream of social transformation unlike his peers in the village who, understandably, focused on survival.

By the time Seva Mandir came to work in his village in 2009, Madan Lal stood out with his first-hand insights about the lay of the land. He supported the Seva Mandir team in setting up the village's first, democratically-elected Village Development Committee (VDC) and its Village Development Fund. Given his passion for and background in social work, villagers quickly chose Madan Lal to be its Secretary, a post that he continues to hold after 15 years of being re-elected for the fifth time.

As it turned out, Seva Mandir was the kind of space Madan Lal needed to channelize his energy and learn about people-led, emancipatory development. It is where this stream turned into a river.

Among the first actions taken by villagers were need assessment exercises. These required villagers to get together to discuss common concerns and jointly work out solutions. This proved difficult. At meetings

called by the VDC and Seva Mandir, the supposedly upper caste refused to sit (at the *jajam* or rug) with the Bhils, for example, to indicate their higher social status. This age-old custom became the first undertaking of the Committee. After a phase of perspective building, Raud ka Gudha saw a historic breakthrough—all villagers, regardless of their caste and community, started to sit together, at one level, as equals.

Then on, led by the VDC, they would meet on the 11th of every month to enlist local issues that required attention. Their serious engagement resulted in collective petitions to the authorities for matters such as water pipelines or toilets. This civic awareness and agency further made the Panchayat alert and responsive to the VDC.

In parallel, women from every family in the village joined the women's self-help group that was set up and registered with Seva Mandir's counsel. In time, the group outgrew its mandate for savings and transformed into a site of broader learning. Women have been running this self-help group non-stop for 15 years during which umpteen loans have been taken (for up to Rupees 80,000), many a personal crises tackled, and pucca houses built. Here too, Madan Lal played a decisive role—women chose him to be its founding Coordinator and, then on, have chosen him repeatedly for the position.

Meanwhile, to strengthen Madan Lal's capacities as the Secretary of the VDC, Seva Mandir trained him in social security applications. A keen learner, he mastered the ins-and-outs of all welfare schemes and entitlements. For the next decade, Madan Lal was able to get numerous individuals and families enrolled for social security. There are anecdotes galore about how villagers - widows with dependent children, family of the worker who died young, the disabled, those who lost their livestock, among others - received their entitlement, compensation, and relief because of Madan Lal. 'Madan Lal Bhil' has since been a household name. People in

and outside his village know him as the 'Master ji' who stands outside the bank every Thursday to fill social security forms for people.

His good work and reputation made his allies coax him into standing for elections. Madan Lal was elected (twice over) as Member, Zila Parishad, and once as Ward Panch. He used these positions for social and developmental agendas. Among other things, he got a transformer approved for a water tank at the village and this kick-started the supply of water across farm lands.

The change that swept through Raud ka Gudha was also of ethics and solidarity.

When the motor for the village's common well was stolen on the instruction of an influential man, villagers chose an unusual response—deliberation and a non-violent boycott of those involved with the theft. This struggle continued till the matter was settled. Around 2014, the VDC decided to develop a 16 hectare piece of common land in the village as a community pasture site. However, it had been encroached upon by powerful families who refused to give it up. As a next step, Madan Lal petitioned the Panchayat Samiti, *Tehsildar* (land revenue officer), Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM), and the District Collector. When this yielded no result, villagers pooled in money to raze the illegal structures built on that common land. The encroachers bribed the bulldozer company to ignore the job offered by the villagers. After a long and patient wait and follow-ups, the SDM and Collector had to intervene in the case and the villagers spent a hefty sum of money to clear their land. The challenge was not over though—the encroacher dragged many members of the VDC into a court case that lasted nine years. In the end, it brought legal and moral victory to the VDC, affirming their belief in the need and strength of the collective.

Such common land has since been protected and nurtured by villagers. Annual sale from the land's produce (dry leaves, rocks, and wood) has brought villagers income that is deposited in the common kitty which has a deposit of Rupees 10 lakhs (as of 2024). Thanks to the mentorship of Seva Mandir, this money has been a lifeguard at critical moments—during the last drought, villagers withdrew one lakh rupees to install a tubewell. Such joint, people-led successes have also influenced neighbouring villages. The Panchayat of Antalia formed 12 VDCs to take on various developmental efforts. However, not all of Madan Lal's work made him popular.

He spoke openly against common local practices such as child marriage, *mrityu bhoj* (the mandatory, public feast organised at death), and so on. Madan Lal worked against superstition through his own example: “If someone had an upset stomach or was seriously ill, villagers turned to the *Bhopa* (priest-healer). I remember a man was brutally injured and it seemed he will never be able to stand again. His family called the *Bhopa* who claimed that only he could cure him, but needed a lot of money to do so. While the family wondered how to collect that vast sum, I rushed the man to the hospital. After weeks of treatment, he could walk again. When my wife fell very ill, the *Bhopa* said that she had been struck by a *dakan* (witch) and she will recover after I sacrificed a goat and offered a bag full of silver jewellery. But I took her to a doctor and she was fine in a few days.”

Years of perspective-building by Seva Mandir and awareness raising by Madan Lal has helped—few people consult *Bhopas* or believe in the myth of the *dakan* today. The *kala jattha* (cultural troupe) of Seva Mandir held all-night long events and the VDC helped transform attitudes through regular conversations on such subjects. At the time of the lockdown imposed during COVID-19, Madan Lal urged the leaders of the Bhil community to not enact *Gavri*, (see the footnote on page 4) for the sake of social distancing.

When they paid no heed, he petitioned senior officials and managed to get a Prohibitory Order and then distributed ration and medical kits in the village.

If all of the above lends the impression that Madan Lal is 'all work, no play', it gets cancelled by the many medals, trophies, certificates, and newspaper reports he has. Madan Lal is an award-winning, State and national-level sportsman who has excelled in cricket and archery. Not satisfied with personal wins, Madan Lal has also coached young, village boys in competitive sports.

The Raud ka Gudha of 2024 has no kutchra, mud houses, no unschooled children, no houses without toilets or water, and all residents are linked to welfare schemes. The youth are educated, and many young men have technical skills and jobs.

What then remains to be done?

For someone who has always lived in a house tucked in thick forest, his answer reflects an intimate relationship with ecology: “Our forests are not safe today. The temperatures have been rising. Rains are untimely. We must match our steps with nature. My worry is not just about my village. This issue is about our planet”.

At this point too, his phone rang. He was needed - in his role as a Para Worker for Seva Mandir - to supervise an ongoing task of natural resource development. Before he leaves home, Madan Lal talks to his two young sons who suddenly lost their mother a month back. The shock and grief of his wife's premature death has not altered the community-facing nature of Madan Lal.

Perhaps this heart break too will fuel his spirit. Sometimes, to keep going is a way to keep healing.

When I is We



Dhula Ram Kharadi, 75 Years

Jhabla Village, Girwa

As far as the eye can see, there are arid hills and brown valleys. The scene looks sparse but feels serene. This duality is also reflected by an old mud house - scant belongings but merry children. The owner of this mud house - Dhula Ram Kharadi - also mirrors calm amid harshness. This unique way of inhabiting spaces is a teaser of what he has kindled in and around him.

Growing up under the care of his unschooled farmer-parents, Dhula Ram spent his childhood grazing goats in the parched valleys of Jhabla. There was no school in the village then. The barely-fertile land offered little

food for Dhula and the family. But there was always food-for-thought at home. Dhula Ram's father was a well-regarded village elder with a stream of visitors who called upon him for advice on matters mundane and heavy. Dhula Ram would listen to their conversations but focus on his father's discerning words.

Looking back, he also cites Seva Mandir as his other decisive influence. About 35 years ago, the organisation had reached out to the residents of Jhabla, to rally them for people-led development. When Dhula Ram learnt about Seva Mandir's plans to start nightly adult literacy classes, he identified it as the kind of good work his father would support. Dhula Ram immediately signed up—not to attend classes but to mobilise others to attend classes. “They gave me a kerosene lantern to go door-to-door and prompt villagers to get literate. One of the first big changes at the literacy class was when a few women started to attend it. This was anything but easy or quick. It took so much hard work and patience to convince them of the benefits of literacy”, recalls Dhula Ram.

Young Dhula Ram also became a regular at village meetings facilitated by Seva Mandir. Little did he know that he was imbibing the fervour and philosophy of the Seva Mandir team. When the idea of a *Gram Vikas Samooh* (Village Development Committee) was mooted in the village, Dhula Ram helped convince villagers of its need. And when it was finally formed, Dhula Ram was chosen as its Secretary. “The literacy classes had done something that I had not thought of earlier—as villagers gathered to learn, it brought a feeling of togetherness which was otherwise felt briefly at annual festivities. At the classes and meetings, people started to think of themselves as a collective”, said Dhula Ram.

This led to one of the most transformative pieces of work for which Dhula Ram - as Chairperson of the *Gram Vikas Samooh* - is known for. The first-ever road to and in Jhabla.

The village of Jhabla was cut off from the world and also the nearest village of Patiya. This is why Dhula Ram, his team, and Seva Mandir decided that a road be built as a first step to develop Jhabla's infrastructure. Seva Mandir offered financial support (rupees one lakh) and Dhula Ram mobilised villagers for *shramdaan* (voluntary labour). This too required much patient energy to persuade villagers and then coordinate the entire road-building endeavour. The result of this collaboration between villagers and Seva Mandir still stands as testimony to their synergy—an 11 kilometres long stretch of road that is the only connection between Jhabla and the world.

That road to and from Jhabla opened up many a pathways. Public transport appeared. The sick and pregnant no longer had to be carried on shoulders, for kilometres, to the nearest doctor. Daily wagers did not have to walk for hours to reach the main road.

Yet, when Seva Mandir and the Gram Vikas Samooch proposed that the people of Jhabla secure their community forest land with biodiverse forestry and boundary-making, many did not agree. They feared losing their lands or its vitality (*“hamari zameen le lenge, zameen bigad jayegi”*).

Bearing his father's persona, Seva Mandir's rationale, and the support of local activists such as Ramesh Chand Meena and Shanta Devi, this hurdle was passed too through community discussions. The people of Jhabla could recognize common land as their cultural and community heritage.

The villagers of Jhabla started work on their first community forest land project, in conjunction with the State's forest department. A 50 hectare plot of land was chosen in the centre of the village so that it is easily accessible for all. However, when a group of villagers objected to the location, Dhula Ram and team successfully argued their case. Then on, villagers gathered to build

its boundary and dig holes to plant new shrubs and trees. In Dhula Ram's term, the *Gram Vikas Samiti* took charge of and managed two more community forest land sites. They also stood up to those who stole wood from this land—having confronted them, they reported the matter to the police and brought an end to the menace. Dhula Ram, though, speaks rather matter-of-factly about the violence and the threats this work involved.

All this effort and its achievements raised Dhula Ram's public profile to the degree that, over the years, he won the Ward Panch elections thrice and the Deputy Sarpanch election once, without opposition.

These prestigious positions did not alter his simplicity or dedication. Rather, they toughened his resolve to transform Jhabla. And so, for example, he helped establish and run the *balwadi* and *anganwadi*⁴ centres in the village; the opening of a health centre in Jhabla is said to be the result of his pleading with government officials.

Social activist Ramesh Chand Meena has much to say about Dhula Ram from the time he assisted him as a 21 year old. “Dhula Ram ji would leave home as early as 3 AM and walk 12 kilometers to catch a bus to reach the Collector's office in Udaipur with a list of demands for the village. There was no road, no electricity in Jhabla, and of course no mobile phones then. So, he would tell his peers to watch out for the leaves he placed on his way to the bus stand, just to indicate to them his trail and whereabouts! Dhula Ram ji encountered innumerable challenges while working to improve rural infrastructure, but never once did he think or say 'why should I have to do all this?' He spent his life working for the village without seeking any personal benefits. He still lives as simply as he did then. In fact, he is a senior citizen now but still tells me to call him even at midnight for social service.”

⁴ Rural preschool and childcare State run facilities.

For Dhula Ram, his role in Jhabla's watershed management is memorable. With Seva Mandir's guidance and five-years of support from NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development), he facilitated a range of interventions. For example, at the Panchayat, he helped get the anicut made and with the guidance of Seva Mandir, he steered villagers to give it a boundary. He adds, "Access to water helped grow wheat in Jhabla, a crop which my father and his forefathers could never harvest because there was never enough water or electricity. Water changed what we grow, what we eat, and how we live". Be it digging and deepening of wells, trench making, care of the community forest land, seed distribution, compost making, among other capacity-building efforts for farmers by Seva Mandir, Dhula Ram was consistently at the helm.

He likes to credit Seva Mandir for the life-long lessons they taught him. "I remember the Coordinator at Seva Mandir, Hira Lal Patel ji. If we were being lax, he would ask us to get to work. And we would, pronto, because he was right. This made us feel responsible for the village. Once, trees had to be planted under the Joint Forest Management scheme. The tree saplings had to be counted and then a hole had to be dug for each sapling. I was occupied with some other work and so I asked my team to count the saplings. At the time of the planting, the saplings outnumbered the holes. Hemraj Bhati, then General Secretary of Seva Mandir, gave me and my colleagues an earful. Delegating work cannot be buck passing. I learnt *imaandari aur zimmewari* (honesty and responsibility) as work ethics." Today, Hemraj Bhati describes Dhula Ram via a list of adjectives: "Sincere, capable, courageous, hardworking, patient, a *Vikas Purush*" (a male leader of development).

All this exposure at Seva Mandir and as a Ward Panch had its impact on Dhula Ram's personal life.

Jhabla had no school even by the time Dhula Ram had children. Since he had come to cherish the value of education, he was the only one in the village who enrolled all his sons at the nearest school, 12 kilometers away, where they lived with an aunt. The boys would leave every Monday and return home on the weekend. Thanks to this, one of his sons is a school teacher and the rest are well-settled in their respective vocations. His grandchildren are either in school or enrolled in post-graduate courses (except a tiny grand-daughter who rocks in a stole-turned-hammock hung from the thatched roof of his mud house).

Dhula Ram and sons stand out in the village where consuming tobacco and liquor is the norm. Like him, all his sons are teetotallers. Like him, their teetotalism also includes tea. And, their abstinence is not inspired by religious dogma but by an understanding of psycho-somatic health.

Dhula Ram believes he learnt about abstinence during his adolescence from a childhood neighbour—a Muslim shopkeeper called Bhoora Khan. “Bhoora would often say things like *'thane ka samne na jana, ghode ke peeche na aana'* (do not go in front of the police station or at the back of a horse). I found him wise, like my father, and started to do just as he asked me to”.

So, does Dhula Ram have no *shauq* (desire)? “I like simple, home-made food”, he answered.

His children have inherited much more than his values—Seva Mandir is part of their lives too. Dhula Ram's eldest son, 51 year old Hira Lal, was a Volunteer with Seva Mandir and learnt poultry farming, seed banking, watershed management, besides other skills. His children – sons and a daughter – are all seeking post-graduate vocational training. In 2008, when Seva Mandir started its women's self-help group (SHG) in Jhabla, Hira Lal was chosen as its *Lekhpal* (record keeper) and has been in the role since,

while Dhula Ram's daughters-in-law are its members. The 17 SHGs of Jhabla too bear the imprint of Dhula Ram—Seva Mandir had turned to him to enrol women in financial literacy and saving.

Speaking of his father, Hira Lal disclosed a remarkable trait, “I have never witnessed an argument between my parents, and they have never had an argument with any of their daughters-in-law or sons”.

Kailash, the 28 year old son of Dhula Ram spoke of the trust that Seva Mandir has built for itself in Jhabla, “Women and, in fact, all of us in Jhabla only save with or take loans from the Seva Mandir SHG or the government SHG Rajeevika. Money lenders cannot approach us because they understand that we now know better”.

Asked to reflect on his journey so far, Dhula Ram, said, “*Araam hai, sab kar liya*” (I am restful, I have done it all).

Dhula Ram has good reason to be content.

The foundations he laid in the village stand strong. The Gram Vikas Kosh (Village Development Fund) he started is now registered with the Government and has a sum of over eight lakhs and a Fixed Deposit. This keeps the village of Jhabla financially secure.

If there is any regret he nurses, it is this: “The road that links us to Jhadol is still incomplete. Wish I could have finished this work earlier. But I will do it. I will mobilise women from the village to go to a local elected representative who promised to help get it done. Once that road is done, it will save villagers hours of time and much money”.

Decades of public service later, Dhula Ram walks slowly but attends the meetings he is invited to. He speaks with pause and care. This grit and grace has earned Dhula Ram the label 'Guru ji' by the local elected representative.

It is as if he has that 'overview effect', the kind that astronauts get after having seen the world from up above. They say it shifts perspective enough to put it all in the right place. Since Dhula Ram re-imagined Jhabla and the lives of its people through collective development, he has certainly not just seen it all but also done it all.

The Earth Keeper



Uday Lal Suthar, 61 Years

Kishanpura village, Kankroli-Rajsamand

Uday Lal evokes admiration and curiosity. In fact, it is curiosity about his admirable work: what is it that animates his radical spirit, his work on the collective conscience?

Since he is too modest to respond to such a question, one is left to join the dots.

Perhaps it is his former vocation as a carpenter? After all, carpentry and consciousness-raising have famous intersections. Jesus, to name one. Uday Lal has spent nearly 45 years shaping, scraping, assembling, and joining.

Could it be that his innate interest and honed skill in creation moved him to 'build' consensus and 'shape' perspective among his fellow villagers? Perhaps decades of labour infused in him diligence and perseverance, qualities that are essential for the challenging work of participatory action against local elite. Perhaps he values the earth and its resources because he is a son of the soil, a child of peasant parents.

Such a hypothesis does not imply that the transition from working on timber to working on social change was smooth.

For Uday Lal though, nothing seems too difficult.

Born in poverty and schooled till class five, Uday Lal stepped into the world of work at the tender age of 12. He left home with some fellow villagers - including an even younger boy - to seek work in the city. Child labour was (is) rife! Adolescent Uday was first taken to Indore where he served tea at an eatery. He regretted leaving home but sensitive to the situation of the family, he stayed on for two years. Having become more resilient, Uday Lal also worked at a store in Mumbai.

Yet, the city became his home only when he went there to learn carpentry, the craft of his ancestors and caste. Once settled in Mumbai, he did not snap links with people in his village of Kishanpura; rather, he encouraged and supported a few other villagers to find work in Mumbai. In all, Uday Lal lived in Mumbai for 45 odd years, starting as an apprentice and retiring as the owner of a carpentry business.

Yet, serendipity had more plans for Uday Lal.

On one of his periodic visits to the village in 2017, he heard about a call for a meeting in the neighbouring village of Devpura. Organized by Seva Mandir, it was to discuss use of common land, afforestation, income generation, soil conservation, and such like. Uday Lal was among the few men from Kishanpura to attend it; there, he learnt of the concept of

collective ownership of common land. Over time, he heard and saw the unique village-NGO (Seva Mandir) partnership in the village of Umedpura where the Gram Sarpanch and villagers collaborated to remove all encroachments from their common pasture land and renew it as a forest.

The democratic philosophy and nonviolent community work spurred by Seva Mandir left a deep imprint on his psyche.

By the time 57 year old Uday Lal decided to retire from carpentry in Mumbai and return to his village in 2019, he imagined this move as a segue towards natural resource development in the village.

Inspired by his love for the village and its people, Uday Lal took the initiative to invite Seva Mandir to Kishanpura and mobilized residents from its 65 families to listen in. Fellow villagers - such as Bheru bhai - appreciated the benefits that such work could bring to the village. With guidance from Shankar Singh Chandana from Seva Mandir, villagers created a 15-member Village Development Committee (*Gram Vikas Samooh*) which elected Uday Lal as its Chairperson.

Why did they choose Uday Lal when there were more powerful men in the village?

“Because others had no time for such work”, is all Uday Lal says in response. But there is more to this.

Prabhu Lal Meena from Seva Mandir adds more reasons: “*In ka vyavhaar* (his behavior) aur (and) *swabhaav* (nature)”. Uday Lal was and is known for being pleasant, enterprising, and having “*sahan shakti*” (forbearance).

Under the guidance of Seva Mandir and the leadership of Uday Lal, in the first phase of work on the community pasture land of Kishanpura, villagers oversaw the construction of a boundary wall around 30 hectares of land, besides water conservation and tree planting.

Remembering those early days, Uday Lal breaks into a giggle at his naïveté, “I thought planting trees would be easy. But, it was very difficult. I had to confront the powerful”.

This was his reference to the encroachment of Kishanpura's community pasture land by a marble trader from the village of Kelva. (Marble work demands extra space for waste disposal, but land is expensive in Rajsamand. And so, many marble traders play dirty—they encroach). To defend his illegal seizure of village land, the trader hired men from the marginalized Regar community to stand up to the villagers. When Uday Lal and other villagers objected to the violation, the marble trader tried other pressure tactics to wrest control of the land—he offered money to the villagers and even involved influential men, such as the Gram Sarpanch and those from the local *thikana* (feudal family). To appear victimized, the encroacher also filed a police complaint against the villagers. When none of these tactics worked, Uday Lal was threatened with violence.

The threats overwhelmed his family. Mohini Bai, the wife of Uday Lal, recalls, “The encroachers even telephoned our son in Mumbai and asked him to stop Uday Lal from working for the common land. This worried us all”.

Uday Lal felt vulnerable. Yet, vulnerability is also the state that can seed courage. The promise of support from the residents of Kishanpura and the team of Seva Mandir enabled Uday Lal to step into service for his community.

To build evidence and legitimacy of their case, Uday Lal and the village committee collected Rupees 25,000 for a survey and boundary-marking of the land. (The principle evolved by Seva Mandir for infrastructural work required that villagers contribute an amount that is 10 per cent of the grant made by Seva Mandir). When they requested the Block Development

Officer (BDO) to mediate, the latter offered a rather troubling advice: give away a part of the village's pasture land to the marble trader. Shocked at the partisanship of the BDO, Uday Lal mobilized villagers to seek the advice of the District Magistrate and other officials.

The air of Kishanpura was charged with hope and resolve.

Motivated by their solidarity, Uday Lal collected Rupees 55,000 from the villagers to construct a path to the pasture land. However, the encroachers returned and became violent. The work had to be halted. A calm Uday Lal filed a report at the local Police Station. However, the Police did not act against the encroachers. Emboldened, the encroachers again threatened Uday Lal. An unfazed Uday Lal and team continued the advocacy around their ethical quest. This commitment finally brought them success—the trespassers were forced to move out and the pathway was built.

Uday Lal credits the support of friends in the village: Ram Lal, a popular voice of the Teli community and a Trustee of the Gram Vikas Samooh, as well as the two sisters - Lehri Bai and Bhamri Bai - who stood by him through thick and thin.

When the young migrants of the village returned home during the outbreak of COVID-19, Uday Lal kindled in them the spirit of service for the village. As a result, they offered their *shramdaan* (voluntary labour) and built a nearly 350-foot-long boundary wall for the pasture land, recycling marble stones dumped by the trader.

Currently, about 100 bighas of pasture land is looked after and forested by the villagers. It is a source of earning (and pride) for them. There also remains a piece of land - 70 bighas - that is still under the hold of encroachers. The Village Development Committee is working on a strategy to free this patch.

Ask Uday Lal about what drives him to such work, and he offers another pithy response, with another warm smile: “*Sabka bhala hai aise kaam mein*” (such work is about collective good).

While his passion for community service is evident, the support of his family has strengthened this value. Once, on a day that Uday Lal was to have an operation, the Village Development Committee was to meet the *tehsildar* (land revenue officer) for an important administrative task. With help from his sons, Uday Lal postponed his operation and instead attended to the job at hand. This selfless love for his people and land is part of his reputation. This is why, as his wife shared, villagers turn to him for help. Uday Lal has donated money to villagers in need and for public tasks.

Look closely and he literally embodies this love—the two lockets that cling to his neck symbolize the Sun and his ancestors. The Uday Mal Lodha Award celebrates this ethos of the personal as communal, and of the social roots of natural forests.



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Amrita Nandy has gifted Seva Mandir something rare. She captures their work through the lives of ordinary people. It is striking how homegrown feminists, forest guardians, ecologically conscious farmers emerge through everyday living. Bhurki Bai could just as well have been a Kamla Bhasin, or an Uday Lal Suthar a Rajasthani Sunderlal. Congratulations, hope this collection comes out in Hindi and other languages soon.

-Pamela Philipose

Author & Journalist

This little book offers some remarkable stories of quiet courage from the Rajasthan countryside. It is also an account of autonomous thriving and a warning from the grassroots about progress along the "narrow track of modernity and development." A map of a new ecological imagination in which Mother Earth is not merely a passive stage but one of the central actors of what would be unjust to call 'development' is signposted by the vivid stories told here.

-Aseem Srivastava

Author, The Grammar of Greed



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