



SILVER FODDER

FIROUZ ARDALAN

Silver Fodder

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Dedicated to Jagat S Mehta

A true inspiration to me.


One of the greatest leaders I will ever know.

I am honored to be able to call him my friend

सेरवाड़ा स्वरूपगंज
गरणवास कोटड़ा



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Foreword

Many volunteers come to Seva Mandir to join its efforts at bringing about social change and material improvements in the lives of people who are significantly deprived, living in villages and small townships around Udaipur. Firouz Ardalan (Fizzy), like these other young idealists, also came to spend a short time in Seva Mandir.

His reputation as a good writer had preceded him and so Seva Mandir requested him to write about the lives and struggles of grassroots leaders. Another book of this kind had been written in English and translated in Hindi, a decade ago. The book, called the “Wasteland: the making of grassroots leaders” by Nandita Roy had been greatly appreciated by the local people as also by outsiders. It was not fair to request Fizzy to do something similar as he did not know Hindi, and it was not long before Fizzy found out how utterly dependent on others was he to fulfill this task.

But rather than give up the project, Fizzy took the courageous step to change his brief. He decided that his acute sense of helplessness gave him a window into the lives of people who were differently handicapped – with acute poverty, the lack of access to education, health care and stable livelihoods, not to speak of the indignity of being dependent on oppressive patrons. He decided to write about the lives of village people alongside his own inner journey to adjust to life so different from the one he had grown up in.

Fizzy’s account will resonate with many others like himself who strive to be global citizens, who want to

understand lives of people who are treated unjustly and share their quest for a better life. It will also resonate with the village people. They will see in Fizzy's writings and reflections, the genuine admiration and insight for their strivings for respect and justice, and their self-critical reflections on the challenges to overcoming their own complicity in upholding oppressive structures of society. Fizzy also shows how the very things that separate one human being from another - such as class, gender, language and nationality – can also provide the bridges to deeply shared concerns to make a better future for all.

Writing this book was not easy. It took more than two years of Fizzy's life – he had only come for six months. It took such a long time to finish not only because of all the physical handicaps involved – such as not knowing the language and his respondents living in remote villages – but more because of Fizzy's own quest for truth. Beyond just writing the book, he wanted to get a deeper understanding of the world view of deprived people – their capacity for joy, ethico-political actions and sophisticated thoughts alongside their own distortions due to the pressures to survive.

Young people all over the world will see in Fizzy's personal journey and reflections, something of their own struggles to connect and contribute to a better common future.

Ajay S. Mehta
President, Seva Mandir



Preface

This project began as a follow up to a book written in 2003 called “The Waste Land, Making of grass-root leaders” by Nandita Roy. Much as in her book, all the individuals discussed here are Ummed Mal Lodha Award winners. The Ummed Mal Lodha Award is given to support and publicly recognize those who are doing outstanding work in the area of natural resource protection and community development. In this respect they all share certain qualities, yet their individual and unique traits as leaders make them all worth examining for their differences as much as for their similarities. “What do leaders have in common?” and, “What distinguishes some leaders from others?” are important and practical questions that guide my research.

I am not an expert in the area of natural resources, nor am I an expert in the field of leadership. Furthermore, I am a foreign volunteer who is not native to India or versed in Hindi. One might ask, and rightly so, why I was chosen to research, interview, and write about grassroots leaders in this field. I too often found myself trying to understand my role and how best to approach this adventure. I will be the first to say that it was not an easy task for me. At times, I had all but given up.

Even though this project focuses on the individuals I have written about, I chose to write in the first person. I found that the best way to explore both the leaders and my own journey as a volunteer was through my own voice. It would be unfair to dismiss my own shortcomings, as I believe it is within this scope that I can offer a unique perspective.

I began this journey with little idea of what to expect or, for that matter, how to start. When I first walked into Seva Mandir, I had spent little time questioning the role of a volunteer in an organisation, and in society. I knew that every odd was stacked against me. I was a non-Hindi speaker living and volunteering in Udaipur Rajasthan and attempting to understand a new culture that I believe I may never fully understand even if I had spent a hundred years researching. I stood riddled with fear from my overwhelming lack of experience in the area of development. I recognised that as an outsider I would always be one step removed from the communities I worked with and the individuals I interviewed. The responsibility to do justice to those in this book and to those who asked me to write this book constantly loomed at the back of my mind. My ignorance as a volunteer was outweighed by my curiosity, yet my eagerness was humbled by my limitations. However, I believe it is due to this very gap, this disconnect, this fish-out-of-water perspective that I was asked to take on this project. I felt lucky enough to have been challenged with it, for my love and admiration of Seva Mandir and India is great. Seva Mandir is an organisation that has great leaders, a strong ethic, and an approach to development and empowerment that is unique, transparent and effective. I am eternally grateful for having known and played a role toward the achievement of its mission.

I spent a number of months in the field researching, and nearly a year writing. It has been as much a journey looking in, as it has been looking out. I have filled myself with the painstaking awareness that hindsight offers, and I often find myself thinking of how I could have done things differently. I

recognise that at times I may have wanted to blame other factors for the slowness of the project or my feeling unmotivated, but in the end it was often my own deficiencies that brought me to a standstill. Saying that, outside contributing factors also helped make this a slow, at times hard, as well as unpredictable journey.

Since I do not speak Hindi, all my fieldwork was completely reliant on a translator. Finding someone who wanted to spend his or her time, most probably in a summer internship, translating for some strange creature such as myself was not always easy. It was also problematic that most of the leaders I interviewed did not even speak pure Hindi themselves! Hence, ideally my translator needed a grasp of the local dialects as well. Luckily, one sunny June day that very person walked into my life in the form of a young law student named Monica Deol. Although I was only blessed with her for a month, she was able to help me take my project from 0 to 60 in 3.9 seconds. During the rainy season, field trips are much more complicated and meeting farmers is difficult as they are working the land. I was blessed with a partner in September for two months who was firstly a friend of mine and secondly an employee of Seva Mandir. His name was Arun Poojary. It was from this partnership I realised, firstly, just how lost I was and, secondly, how necessary having Arun was. He worked in the natural resource department, and his expertise in the subject enabled me to really grasp a deeper meaning of many of the concepts I was having trouble with.

Even though all the leaders I interviewed were chosen under a particular set of criteria, I did not want to take the

notion of leadership used by the Ummed Mal Lodha Awards and simply prove it by using these individuals as examples. I read many books on leadership and had many discussions about leadership with a great many people in and out of Seva Mandir. What I came to quickly understand, during and after all these conversations, was that the term “leadership” can be slightly infuriating. In fact, the more I read, the less I liked the word. The truth is, leadership is as much a process as it is a quality. It can be embodied in a single person or exemplified by an entire group of people. It is an innate quality people are born with as much as it is a skill that can be taught and learned. It can be as context specific as it can be universal. It is as culturally dependent as it is within our very nature as humans. Saying that, what I found along my journey is that a leader resembles a teacher more than anything else. Sometimes I wonder if it would have done me better to first understand what makes a good teacher, although I don’t think answering that question would be much easier!

My quest was to understand why certain individuals who make up some of the most marginalised parts of society are able or feel the need to act in their community in conscious altruistic ways, even when there are easier and more advantageous ways to promote one’s own interest. How can one who is unable to predict if he or she will be able to feed his family, or have access to clean drinking water, or proper health care, have a concern greater than that of immediate needs? What is it that fuels these individuals to work for community harmony and against the often-tempting tyranny of corruption and extortion? Finally, what are the factors that encourage or tempt one to alienate his or her fellow countrymen in order to

promote one's own status? Why does it often feel like, with all the struggles and hardships these men, women, and children face in this dry and at times unforgiving landscape, they often become spectators to their own struggles and the agents perpetuating their own exploitation?

Questions like these constantly crept into my thoughts, some more than others, serving as useful guides in my quest to understand the individuals and subjects I was asked to write about. I was interested in the individuals who refused to be spectators, who fought complacency, and transformed their community's perceptions. And it is exactly those who have turned the spectator into the spectacle that I have come to learn more about.



Acknowledgement

From the deepest part of my soul I would like to thank Neelima Ji, Ajay, Priyanka Ji, Shailendra, Arun, Monika, Andre, and Sherry Buchanan. I am also hugely grateful to so many others who made this book possible through their patience, kindness and guidance along the way...you know who you are!

Most especially, however, I want to profoundly thank all the leaders who willingly participated in this book, who taught me so much and for whom this book is written.

Firouz Ardalan



The Road

Depending on the time of day, the road into the field can be anything from relatively peaceful to partially suicidal. It can be over-crowded, dangerous, beautiful, unforgiving, and warm. Sometimes it is baking hot, freezing cold, out of control, irrational, logical, sensitive, soft, hard and a million other contradictory terms. Driving along a narrow road during a moment of calm, whilst being tossed up, down, and around the mountainous hills, I find myself trying to reach out of the window to pet the gentle landscape. This longing to touch the world outside the window comes from a desire to quiet my overwhelmed sense of amazement, appreciation, and sadness for this mythical place. The rolling hills – sprawled out across the vast and endless landscape, draped in their golden yellow suits, threaded by the tired old grass – would make a perfect setting for a divine fairy tale. Maybe this is nature's way of reminding the few who get to see this land, and the even fewer who have the time to contemplate it, that the ups and downs of the road into the field may be a blessing in disguise, helping preserve this place from the dangers of reckless modernity and unquestioned tradition.

I have travelled in public and private jeeps, buses, motorcycles, scooties, rickshaws, and bicycles. I have felt the paralysing heat of an overloaded bus in the middle of a Rajasthan summer where I found myself literally gasping for air at every chance I could get. I have found myself on the tops of jeeps floating above the road, holding on for dear life as the jeeps lurched around dangerous bends, and bravely forded

parched riverbeds. I have found myself in the back of jeeps with goats uncomfortably squished between my legs, nibbling at my toes. I have seen buses with so many people in them, on them, and hanging off them that my heart would literally skip a beat. Then another would pass, and another one, and another one. After a time, you are ashamed to admit that you hardly even notice them passing you by at all. Soon you realise this is the reality of the road. The drivers start to resemble sea captains steering vessels in the unrelenting tides of the ocean. At times, I can't help but look for a life vest, thinking, "Any minute now we are going to be shipwrecked!" Then... silence. Squeal of brakes. Evasive action. Heart beat. Smile. Silence.

At times it felt as if the road into the field is something you had to survive, not enjoy. Even though the driver may be quite beautifully exuding the essence of calm, his unquestioning desire to push the limits of the road at every opportunity does not always reassure the passengers that he upholds the same sentiment for life as they might. However, as with any well-travelled path, you learn its ins and outs, its intricacies, its beauties and its dangers. As you become more familiar with the road, the chaos of it becomes little more than a bleep on your radar for concern.

Once you arrive in the field, you might be met with stories of inspiration that fill you with hope and admiration, or be presented with harsh realities that fill you with gut-wrenching disgust. You might arrive to find boredom extending its friendly hand or an unexpected adventure tugging at your arm. Perhaps the only certainty is that the agenda you set out

to accomplish will surely face some creative alterations along the way.

Seva Mandir is a locally run Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) working in villages in the Udaipur and Rajsamand districts of the state of Rajasthan in northwest India. As an NGO, it focuses on strengthening sustainable livelihoods, bolstering individual capabilities and promoting and empowering local village institutions. As a volunteer, I worked in the NGO's education, health, and natural resource departments. I began my work by initially helping with confidence-building in youths and educating deaf and blind children, later segueing into researching leadership at the grassroots level.

To give a sense of the areas I was working in I will briefly describe Jhadol, one of the blocks (an administrative subunit of a district composed of multiple villages) in which I worked. Although it is an average block in many ways, every block will have its differences.

Jhadol is elegantly sprawled over 144,100 hectares in the south-western part of the Aravalli mountain range. Its population, consisting mostly of Bhil communities, is just under 200,000. Roughly forty-six percent of the total population is literate, which is comparatively high in relation to bordering blocks, though still below the national average of approximately sixty-six percent. As little as thirty years ago, this entire region would have been relatively dense, untouched forest, teeming with wild animals such as leopards, tigers, and eagles. However, the incredible rate at which logging has taken place has all but destroyed the forests. The Bhil community has lived in these

forests for generations. They had planted their roots in this land long before the Aryans arrived or Hinduism was even established in the region. The Bhils, known for their hunting and gathering practices, depended on the forests and other natural resources for their livelihoods.

Historically, the principalities and wealthy landowners controlled the land with a tight fist; however, the villagers were able to collect different products from the forests to fulfil their livelihood needs. When India gained independence from the British in 1947, the forests became easily accessible to the villagers and the wider public. The lush forests also became a good source of revenue for the government. Without well-defined keepers and owners of the land and, most of all, with a lack of an appropriate governance mechanism, increasing exploitation and greed has led to the erosion of these great natural resources.

Most families today survive through a combination of agriculture, rearing livestock, and labour work. As these traditional ways of life become less and less viable, families are no longer able to survive by staying in their villages and working as farmers. Many migrate from villages in Jhadol to Udaipur every day in search of work. So much so that migration itself has become a major problem, posing many dangers for communities. This is especially evident amongst children who, as young as nine or ten, are frequently forced to travel to big cities in search of often perilous and exploitative work.

On the road I would find myself contemplating these issues and my role in the protection of these landscapes as one of the many reasons I had come here in the first place. Being on

overflowing buses travelling at high speeds around blind corners, or on motorcycles with 3-4 people at a time, even occasionally skidding off the side of the road uncontrollably in complete darkness, all made me question the significance of this work. Looking at the men and women I was working with who have chosen to spend their lives in the service of others, I think anyone of these souls could be the hero of a story worth telling.

These thoughts would often come as the sun takes its last breath just before it slips behind the westerly hills for the night and the earth shines its last silvery glow of light as the landscape slips into its evening attire. The road somehow helps me realise that beyond all the sadness and hardship, beyond the inequalities and the injustices that people endure, there is hope. Perhaps this realisation comes from the movement of the car or the gentle rumble of the engine, hypnotising my mind as the journey affords me the time to think, look back, look forward, question, and ponder. Yet, wherever this thought originates, it is worth being reminded of every second.

It was on the many roads to the field that I slowly began to understand the importance of my journey. Hidden within the sleepy communities of the Udaipur and Rajsamand districts are men and women who stand not only as role models for their families and communities, but potentially for the world. It is these men and women, all of whom have been acknowledged for their outstanding work in environmental protection, livelihood amelioration, and empowerment of rural communities, that I have come to explore. I have come to talk with, learn from, and document some of the struggles and

achievements of these important grassroots leaders who live amidst the rolling hills of Southern Rajasthan, to recognize them for their contributions to society and to allow their story to help guide and teach others who may one day find themselves inspired to help their own communities.



Learning to Drive

One of the scariest things I did during my stay in India was to become a motorcycle driver. I had never been on a motorcycle before I arrived in India, so a good friend taught me how to drive while I was there. I learned in an empty lakebed; the terrain was rocky, muddy, and unpredictable. I even crashed a few times! But it was not long before I was confident and driving around the lakebed like I owned it. Driving in the streets of India was an entirely different story, however!

My friend brought me into the centre of town, got off the bike and flatly said:

“Drive.”

I smirked, “Are you crazy? It’s rush hour right now. I can barely even change gears properly. I might kill you and everyone else on the road!”

He looked at me with a stern face and a look of absolute trust, and repeated, “Drive.”

I jumped on the bike and, despite some near misses, made it home in one piece. I was terrified and thrilled at the same time. From then on, I had the confidence and courage to enter the madness of India’s roads, having dived into the deep end and emerged unscathed. That day, I learned a great lesson about putting away the fear of failure and focusing on the satisfaction of success.



Ghisi Bai



Ghisi Bai is one of the most respected persons in Parmada, a small village located in Girwa block in the foothills of the Aravalli mountain range in southern Rajasthan. An older, illiterate woman with an extraordinary presence, she unveils a wonderful and endearing smile as she speaks. It always made me feel warm and welcome in her company. Beyond her weathered eyes is a spark of youth that would inspire even the most pessimistic soul. Although she is illiterate, Ghisi Bai is not without education or knowledge. As she would aptly say, “Literacy is not education!” Indeed, after spending time with illiterate individuals, my understanding of illiteracy’s meaning and implications has changed greatly.

Ghisi Bai’s hand-constructed mud hut is a forty-five minute motorcycle ride from central Udaipur. Udaipur, although not as large as some Indian cities, is one of considerable wealth and history. Once, when I was driving through a small village, a friend who was from Udaipur said to me ‘I can’t believe that, in

this day and age, people still live like this!’ At one point I would normally have agreed with such a statement. Listening to Ghisi Bai, however, I found myself more comfortable with her exclamation, ‘I cannot believe the way they live in Udaipur!’ not the other way around!

However you feel about the respective ways of life, the contrast between how I lived in Udaipur and Parmada, a mere forty kilometres away, was so striking it was as though I had used a time machine in order to reach Ghisi Bai’s home. Yet, all I had needed was a 1986 red Hero Honda with a half tank of gas and the will to battle an unrelenting sun. It did not take me long, however, to see that the conversations, thoughts, insights, and ideas emanating from this woman dressed in a traditional and starkly red sari were nothing short of modern, if not ahead of their time. There was a sense of humanity in her gestures, a sense of warmth in her speech, and a clear sense of thoughtfulness in her expression, all of which made interacting with her a delight. The truth is I was not sitting next to an empowered rural India woman; I was sitting next to an astonishingly empowered human being. She commanded the respect of her entire community, having fought for her villagers’ rights and against corruption her whole life. She has introduced and implemented many health and education initiatives over her years as a leader. All this and she could barely even write her name!

Ghisi Bai is the youngest child in her family, which belongs to the Gujjar (an ethnic group) community. When I asked her if she would tell me a little about her childhood, she said, “I was the only girl in my family, and as a result I was rarely

let out. I was not educated, and if there was ever milk on the table I would be the last one to receive some... if any at all.” Sadly, many women are often regarded as a financial burden in India because their families have to pay dowry to the husband’s family when they get married. This notion and the tradition of *purdah*- the culture of keeping their face covered in front of men and elder women- prevent many families from educating their daughters. They see it as a waste of money since they will eventually be married off. However, an educated woman can have such a powerful impact on a community that this practice negatively affects the entire community. Research has indicated, for example, that children with educated mothers are generally found to have higher levels of education than children without educated mothers.

Ghisi Bai’s husband’s family was not very wealthy and did not have enough land to give them upon their marriage, so the land where Ghisi Bai lives today was provided by the entire village. It was this sort of generosity that inspired her to give back to the community and become more socially active. She heard about Seva Mandir from women in neighbouring villages and started attending meetings. Feeling inspired, she then organised similar ones in her own community. Her natural popularity and ability to bring the women of her village together made her an ideal grassroots volunteer for Seva Mandir.

Through the introduction of Seva Mandir’s Self Help Groups (SHG), Ghisi Bai created a unique space for women to become active and respected. In the meetings, the women discussed relevant issues such as birth control, health, education, and domestic abuse. Ghisi Bai was a natural listener

and an eager helper who would often involve herself in defusing domestic disputes that arose in the community.

Ghisi Bai offered a unique insight into how honest, true and meaningful grassroots leadership can work. Illiteracy did not hold Ghisi Bai back. In fact it almost felt as though it were a point of pride for her to be able to say, “Look what I can do and I am not even literate.” This, of course, did not mean she was uneducated. As she explained, “Seva Mandir gave us education and made us the teachers we are today.” This sort of education is just as effective, if not more effective than traditional education, because it is practical and meaningful, not only for Ghisi Bai, but for the larger community as well.

I wondered how Ghisi Bai’s illiteracy affected her success as a leader. Is it possible that it actually helped her gain the respect of her community? She never allowed her inability to read and write stop her from doing what she wanted. Other women, seeing what she can do, might think, “Why can’t we do the same?” That is not to say Ghisi Bai didn’t recognise the benefits of traditional education and literacy. She has sent all her children to school and proudly boasts that every child in her village of Parmada goes to school.

Through her years of training at Seva Mandir she has learned understanding and confidence. Confidence is a quality found in all the leaders in this book- literate and illiterate alike. Sadly, most societies stigmatise those who cannot read and write, and in this way undermine illiterate individuals’ confidence. Building confidence is something that everyone should strive towards. Ghisi Bai stands as a role model to those around her, demonstrating how to maintain and nurture one’s

own dignity and pride. At the grassroots level, respect and dignity are often the only forms of payment and, as such, must not be taken lightly.

One example, which highlights Ghisi Bai's confidence and how her womanhood was simultaneously a problem and a solution, arose roughly five years ago. The Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) of the village, who was being paid a salary by the government, was found to be demanding money from the villagers. The ANM often referred cases to her own home unnecessarily and used to conduct deliveries privately for the purpose of charging extra fees. Ghisi Bai and the village women tried to reason with the nurse midwife, however, to no avail. They went to the local government official to complain which prompted the doctor of the village, who lived in Udaipur, to help solve the issue, but it soon became clear that his loyalties lay with the nurse midwife. The doctor asked Ghisi Bai to sign a letter explaining that the nurse midwife had taken money at one point of time but had now stopped. This would have been used as evidence in court to show that the problem was resolved. However, knowing that the nurse midwife would not stop taking money, Ghisi Bai rightly refused to sign.

After that incident, one day when Ghisi Bai was going to work, her bus was stopped and Ghisi Bai was removed from the bus and taken into a private vehicle. Inside the vehicle the doctor and other people involved in the inquiry against the ANM, threatened her and forced her to sign the letter. Sometime later, this issue was finally brought before an administrative panel in the state capital, Jaipur, where the paper that she had signed was presented as proof that the

problem had been resolved. Ghisi Bai was undaunted. “Everyone can get money,” she said, “but not everyone can gain the respect of others.” Since she was so highly revered in the village, her community backed her up and testified that the doctor and nurse midwife had falsified the original letter. Soon after, the corrupt nurse midwife was removed.

Deplorably, this sort of exploitation is common in many villages in Rajasthan. Small communities that do not have strong leadership or are not aware of their rights have little to offer in the form of resistance against such acts. Ghisi Bai’s inherent and learned confidence, the Seva Mandir trainings, and her ability to understand how important it was to work for the common good, enabled her to stand up against such odious crimes.

I can only imagine how many times Ghisi Bai may have felt like I did when I first drove home from the centre of town; nervous yet undeterred by the sense of fear that lurks in the unknown. It is this fearless approach to the unknown that has turned Ghisi Bai from a learner into a teacher. I do not pretend to compare my experience to that of Ghisi Bai, yet the blind confidence I needed in order to survive the ordeal of driving in Udaipur for the first time is the only way I can attempt to understand how she must have felt. I too was proud of having succeeded without any formal lessons. I too needed to rely on a degree of blind confidence and the belief that I was capable of achieving what I wanted in spite of my informal education on the road.



Motorcycles, Jeeps, Trucks, and Buses

When you learn to drive in India and begin to understand the law of the road, you start to see a very clear hierarchy of vehicles' rights. The first time I sat on the back of a friend's motorcycle, he casually explained to me how the road works.

"In general the rule is simple," he said. "If it is bigger than you, it has the right of way!"

Needless to say, his explanation to me, while we sat on the back of a motorcycle without helmets, didn't make me feel comfortable. Bicycles, rickshaws, and motorcycles are at the bottom of this hierarchy, while jeeps, trucks, and buses are at the top. There is also a little less tasteful, crasser rule that, if the occupants are more powerful or wealthy, they further trump other vehicles. Although at first this scared me, I soon realized that, despite the hierarchical ramifications of particular vehicles, I would always get to my destination regardless of which vehicle I was in. And even though these preconceived notions of how one is supposed to act on the road are followed, I remember thinking, just because a person's car is bigger or smaller than another's doesn't mean they are better or worse, and just because the bike I was on was smaller than the car driving next to me didn't mean I was less able to get where I wanted to go.



Kalulal Gameti



Kalulal Gameti's intense youthful gaze emanating from grey blue eyes belied his age, likening him to that of a man in his mid-twenties, full of life! For a grandfather four times over, he certainly has an energetic soul. He speaks in a manner that not only encourages you to question and dig deeper into the issues at hand, but also conveys a sense of great wisdom, as though he is imparting knowledge from a profound and meaningful place. Indeed, to this day, he is called '*Matsab*' which means teacher in Hindi. I felt humbled by Kalulal Gameti's sense of modesty and sincerity. His cautious approach to community work created a calming, gentle atmosphere, enabling him to be particularly effective working in a village with a diverse caste group.

The village Dulawato Ka Guda is home to over ten different caste groups. So many castes in one place can create an atmosphere particularly difficult for community work, as caste prejudices can often hinder the process of change. Amazingly, Kalulal Gameti, a member of the lowest caste,

played a pivotal role in unifying the village through his development work. One of Kalulal Gameti's principal abilities as a leader is to recognise first where the power lies in the village, and, second, what must be done in order to utilize that power. Kalulal Gameti highlights how power can be seen as a natural resource that, if nurtured, acknowledged, and respected, can play a significant role in a community's ability to enact positive change. Caste hierarchies play an important role in emphasizing power relations within any community. That Kalulal Gameti was able to do the work he did, while being from the lowest caste in the village, is testament to his passion and ability to transcend social norms and customs on the road to community development.

Kalulal Gameti's first project was simple and clear: he wanted to build an animal shed and a toilet for his home. He lacked these essential utilities and decided to act upon it. Once the other villagers recognised his success in doing so, it was not long until they wanted to emulate Kalulal Gameti's work. Seeing that his community was in need, he began to help those who wanted such amenities for their homes. Soon enough, his entire village had animal sheds and toilets!

Kalulal Gameti explained, "The truth of the matter is that in this village even the richest of men are still quite poor."

What began as one man's vision soon became a vision shared by many, irrespective of age, social status or caste. Through this project Kalulal Gameti learned a very clear and vital lesson: regardless of the project, working with different castes and age groups within the village was essential in

fostering change. It was not long before this became Kalulal Gameti's modus operandi.

"Dialogue, patience and time are key factors in achieving any sort of community project," Kalulal Gameti calmly repeated as we spoke in front of his house. At the time, we were surrounded by his grandchildren who stood cautiously, curiously observing our interview (I can only imagine what they thought of my appearance and the alien recording devices I used and pointed at their grandfather!). Over the course of the interview, they become more adventurous, and before long Kalulal Gameti was fending off sneak attacks from all the little ones! As they crawled on him pulling at his being, his grin illustrated how much he loved and enjoyed his family, and how truly important family and community are to him.

It's no surprise that, for Kalulal Gameti, the creation of the community centre was one of his greatest achievements. The introduction of the community centre had a huge impact on both the development of the village and the harmony of the community overall. Before the community centre had been constructed, there was no space to hold large government or caste meetings, other events such as weddings, religious ceremonies, and programs such as the Adult Literacy Program or the Pre -School Balwadi Program. Having an indoor space for programs such as these was crucial, especially for the wet and cold seasons. Kalulal Gameti was quick to understand this and proposed building a community centre. Fortunately the proposal went smoothly and the centre was built relatively quickly. As Kalulal Gameti said, "It helped people come closer to each other," especially those who normally would not want to

or did not know how. This achievement alone would be sufficient to bring recognition to Kalulal Gameti, yet that he did this being a member of one of the lowest castes in his village is even more impressive. Transcending a hierarchy that hindered so many people before him is notable; not only for being rare, but for showing others that the vessel one is born into doesn't have to prevent people from getting to where they want to go. Motorcycle or jeep, one can always get to their destination and reach their goal!

It should be noted that Kalulal Gameti did not work alone. In fact, none of the leaders I met would ever claim they did. For example, Kalulal Gameti was crucial in creating the Gram Samuh, an informal group of villagers with an internal hierarchy or committee much like that of a local government. The Gram Samuh, an institution created by Seva Mandir, is a way of organising village communities while adhering to the local power relations in order to keep local government and the community accountable. Although the Gram Samuh is not a legal entity, its authority comes from a structure that is democratic and powered by numbers. It has also become a medium for channelling funding from private sources for development initiatives in the communities. This entity is extremely valuable and effective in community work in many villages. It has, for example, helped Kalulal Gameti preserve the common lands of his village. And, although Kalulal Gameti's presence was integral in its creation in Dulawato Ka Guda, it would not have come into fruition without the will and help of the people that enabled his village to grow and stand together as a model for other communities.

Kalulal Gameti's skills as a humanitarian, educator, and leader are most obvious in his efforts to ensure the preservation of Dulawato Ka Guda's natural resources. Regrettably, poor management systems have often laid pasturelands and common lands to waste. Communities who take the necessary actions to protect their common land see positive and tangible results within their community. Although very few, if any, projects in this field yield immediate benefits, the benefits can and often do surpass villagers' initial expectations over the long run. Tragically there are times when the forest department develops an area and pours a good deal of resources into it, but does not pay attention to the social, political and power structures, which ultimately ensure the sustainability of the intervention. Yet it is precisely the way forests, common lands, and pasturelands are managed that dictate the longevity and sustainability of the project. The failure of a common land initiative can be disastrous, not only on a physical level, through the gain or loss of natural resources, but on a social level, through the gain or loss of community confidence. This was no different in Kalulal Gameti's village, where in 2002 famine struck and nearly brought it to ruin. A severe lack of hay meant a great deal of livestock starved to death. This traumatizing event led Kalulal Gameti and the Gram Samuh to seek out ways to develop their common lands, for fodder. During their research, they discovered that their own villagers had encroached on nearly ninety percent of the land that had been allocated as common lands to their village.

Dulawato Ka Guda has a total of 228 households, 101 of which had encroachments on the common land. Villagers would encroach by extending their personal land boundaries or by

finding a separate piece of common land and staking a claim to it. Solving this issue would not be easy, and would require the confident minds of determined men and women to address it. Kalulal Gameti recognized that, in order for this type of work to be successful, he would need the support of every caste and age group. By utilizing the elders of the village and the more socially respected individuals, he created unity amongst the different castes. Thus when pockets of individuals would protest or obstruct the process, Kalulal Gameti and the Gram Samuh had the necessary strength to maintain unity.

How encroachments are dealt with can be complicated. Merely identifying an encroachment in the first place is no simple task. In the process of trying to discover who is responsible for an encroachment, more problems might be created than solved! Furthermore, once the who and the what are understood, removing the encroachment is a complex and possibly very emotional process, seeming at times almost impossible. Knowing this, Kalulal Gameti and the Gram Samuh only approach encroachers when they are certain the entire community, including those asked to relinquish territory, will benefit from it.

There are different types of encroachers and not all are asked to relinquish 'their' land. The Gram Samuh decided that any encroacher who could prove they acquired their encroachment before 1980 would be left alone. Anything after 1980, however, was to be assessed for its legitimacy, with two considerations in mind. First, any encroacher who used the land solely for agriculture was left alone. Second, the encroacher could only be removed when the Gram Samuh, as a collective, was ready to begin developing the land.

Land literacy, or the knowledge of land rights and responsibilities, can be extremely low in these villages. As a result, many families have been encroaching for years, unaware of their infringement. Kalulal Gameti empathized with many of the families who had been unknowingly encroaching, but stood firm in his conviction, making clear that it is almost always better for the encroacher to move because it often leads to a stronger, more secure residence for all. Encroachments are often on government land and run the risk of being reclaimed at any time. However, when the Gram Samuh negotiates an agreement with the encroacher, whether to reduce the encroachment or relocate it entirely, it ensures that the agreement becomes legally binding, in turn offering security and stability to those involved.

The common lands of Dulawato Ka Guda were spread throughout the village and not located in one central space. This alleviated some of the tension since they would only have to deal with individual families or smaller groups of encroachers at a time. One can only imagine what it would have been to reassess 101 encroachers over a single piece of land all at once! Each piece of common land was dealt with separately before moving to the next. Nevertheless, this process ranged anywhere from quite simple to almost impossible.

The case of Nathu illustrates both the difficulties and solutions the Gram Samuh may encounter. It was decided that Nathu had wrongfully encroached on the common lands in three separate areas. Yet he refused to move, claiming it was his legal right to be there. Attempting to compromise with Nathu, the Gram Samuh was willing to let him keep two of his encroachments if he gave up a particular one. He still did not co-

operate. The Gram Samuh sought the legal authority to protect and develop the pasture through the acquisition of a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the Sarpanch. The NOC merely states that the local government has no objection to the development of the village pasture by the Gram Samuh. In principal, eviction of a villager by the Gram Samuh from a common land is possible after obtaining the NOC.

Nathu was a powerful man in the village, and had friends in high places. One of those friends was the Sarpanch, no less. Kalulal Gameti was angry with the Sarpanch. So it was not a great surprise to Kalulal Gameti and the Gram Samuh when their request for the NOC for that particular pasture was denied. After months of unsuccessfully attempting to reach a compromise with Nathu, the village decided to resort to social sanctions as a way of forcing Nathu Mana off his encroachment. Social sanctions are often the most effective form of governance for traditional management systems, particularly punishment, when people commit crimes in these communities and the government refuses to penalize them.

All the leaders in this book have at some point either expressed interest in or cited the use of social sanctions as a means of pressuring individuals or families that have committed crimes the local government remains aloof to. Social sanctions are a fundamental aspect in understanding the communities being discussed in this book. It is through the use of social sanctions that we see community values and effective community action play out.

Social sanctions are not used lightly. They can range from slightly inconvenient, such as restricting people from going

to a particular social event, to something as completely debilitating as prohibiting others from helping the sanctioned in times of distress. The worst of all social sanctions is being socially ostracized, where the sanctioned are normally no longer able to take part in weddings, village meetings, funerals, birth rites, community events, and, if there is a bad crop, no one will give them spare food.

Within these communities, social sanctions are preferred over the involvement of authorities such as the police. By involving the police or lawyers from the outside, the village risks becoming fragmented. Even though at the end of the ordeal there may be a clear winner and loser, the entire village will often have suffered. The villages have systems in place to deal with almost any kind of problem. Bringing authorities into a dispute automatically detracts from a harmonious resolution, because it is no longer about the community, but rather becomes something very individual. It sounds funny because it might seem as if there are no personal feuds in the village, which is clearly not the case, yet the village will wonder why the family took outside help to resolve its problems. People will be upset for this intrusion, finding it hard to accept any resolution because control has been taken from their hands.

According to some grassroots leaders, social sanctions are only considered after genuine attempts have been made by the community to solve the problem through dialogue. In Nathu's case, for example, the Gram Samuh attempted to resolve the issue through talks with the Sarpanch, which failed. Yet, rather than take this case to court, they preferred to deal

with it on their own. It is rare that social sanctions fail, but if they do, then the community will attempt action through legal avenues. As an aside, one cannot help but think that, just as social sanctions can be used positively, they can also be used negatively. Even though, without fail, every leader I spoke with claimed this was not the case, it is important to understand that this is indeed localised justice and not impervious to the flaws of those enacting it.

In the case of Nathu, the village decided to ostracize him. No one would attend Nathu's social functions such as weddings or funerals, and no sharing of food in times of need and no socialising were allowed. Even talking to him in public was prohibited! Such severe social sanctions in villages are rarely used, but are highly effective. It was not long before Nathu wrote a letter to the Sarpanch requesting that the NOC be issued to the village.

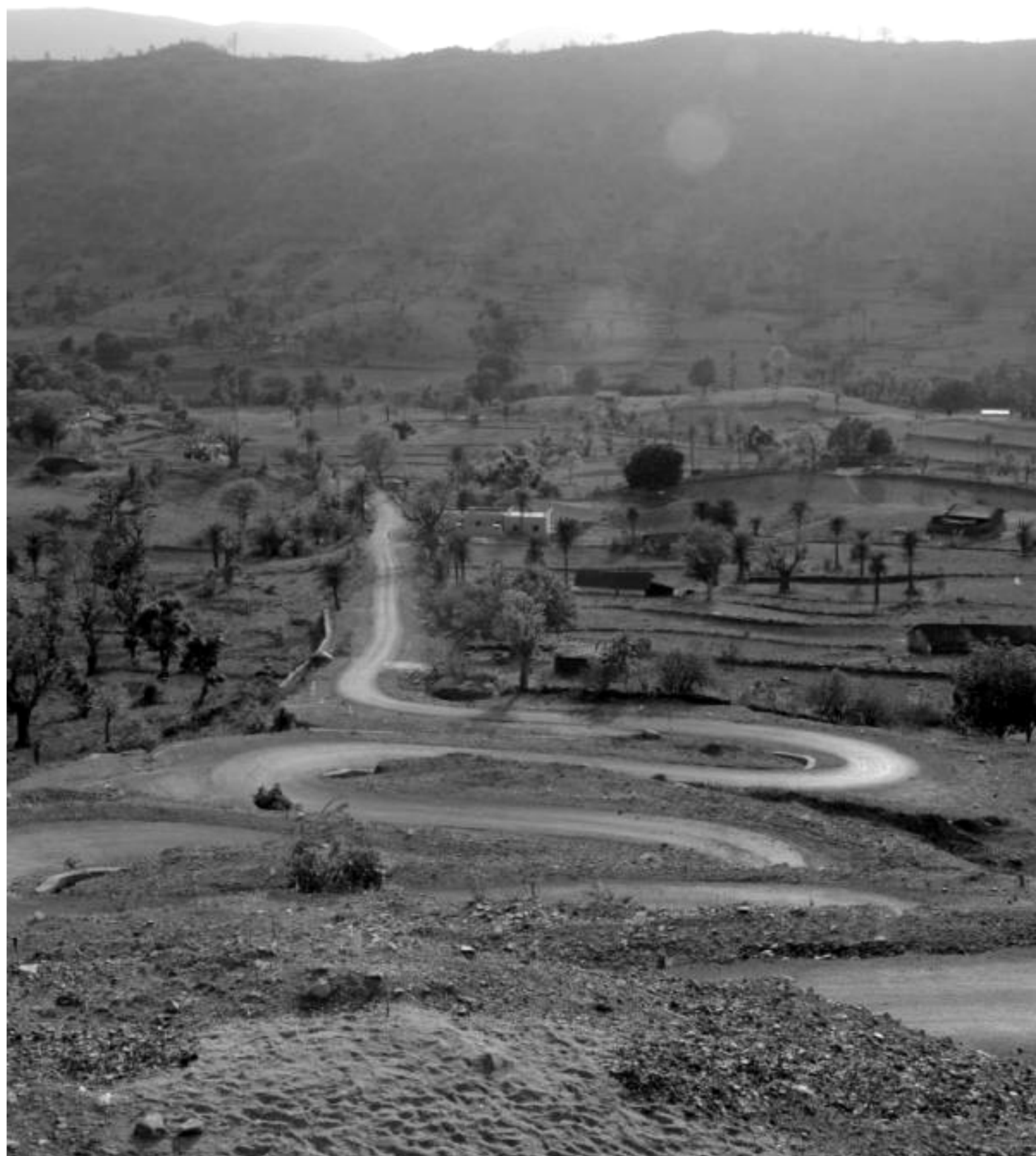
There are a myriad of reasons for encroachments, which is why each case must be looked into individually. The rich encroach as well as the poor, and encroachers can be found in all caste groups. To justly remove a family from an encroachment, a dialogue must be established in order to fully understand the issue at hand. As illustrated by Nathu, sometimes more drastic action is needed. The ability to impose effective social sanctions is a tribute to the community's unity and commitment.

Due to the determination and care of both Kalulal Gameti and the community, coupled with an effective management system and a large degree of diligence, Dulawato Ka Guda has already removed more than 50 of the 101 original

encroachers discovered in 2002. Today, Dulawato Ka Guda has roughly 55 hectares of pasturelands for the community to use. Under the leadership of Kalulal Gameti, the Gram Samuh removed encroachments from ten parcels of village pastures between 2006 and 2010. All these developed pieces of village pasture are now collectively being protected and managed by the Gram Samuh. The harvested grass and other products are shared amongst the beneficiary households on an equitable basis. Dulawaton Ka Guda illustrates how the process of protecting and nurturing these areas can bring great rewards.

Kalulal Gameti, a motorcycle amongst large automobiles, forged through the traffic of a caste system without trepidation. He clearly understood the size of his vessel, yet his place in society was no excuse for not bettering the state of his community. Although perhaps a smaller vehicle amidst a crowded hierarchy of individuals, Kalulal Gameti achieved great things and reached his goals of community improvement. Kalulal Gameti stands as a reminder that leaders take all shapes and forms, that on the road any destination is within any vehicle's reach, and that if one understands this, great things can be achieved.





The “Impassable” Road

In front of us lay a large half destroyed bridge. Having crumbled from years of use, the road was impassable for the car I was in. We decided our only option was to get out and walk, as the journey ahead had not come to an end. We picked up our bags and cautiously walked across the bridge, which was precariously arched over a drying riverbed. Unexpected events occur, but we had to learn how to adapt to them. Most of all I noted how a clear road was not always needed in order for one to reach their destination.

I remember hoping for rain. Seeing empty riverbeds always filled me with a feeling of unease. The river is a lifeline that provides the single most important element to human existence on earth: water. It was a sad and rude awakening that I found myself repeatedly asking where the river had gone. One of my strongest memories from my time in India was from the very first village I visited outside of Udaipur, where a boy, who had just come back from the river after a night of heavy rainfall, was showing images of rushing water captured with his phone camera! (And, yes, in rural India most people have phones even if they may never have reception!)

Water shortage is a major problem in Udaipur. The contrast in the landscape between the weeks leading to the monsoon and the weeks following it are as impressive as chilling. A failing monsoon is not only caused by no rain, but also the frequency in which the rain comes. If it rains too much at once, the topsoil might be destroyed. If it does not rain enough, the soil can harden and act as a water repellent! To manage the unpredictability of rain, many farmers grow two types of crops

at once: rice, which is highly dependent on water and maize, which is more resilient to drought.

Today many villages run out of water during the summer months before the next rainfall is expected. Wells can dry up a few weeks before the monsoon, which at fifty-degree Celsius, can seem like a death sentence on its own, never mind the implications of this occurring over several months. With ever more failing monsoons, solutions will have to become more creative and more immediate; an even greater reason to ensure that there is a diversity of leaders from all walks of life.

Organisations like Seva Mandir have excellent solutions, amazing workers, and inspired leaders who want change and can make it. It's the tree we plant today that will help hydrate our grandchildren's earth. I cannot stress this point enough, because so much of mankind sees only what we can do to satisfy our needs today, leaving others to deal with tomorrow when it comes.



Mani Devi



Aamod is a remote village tucked away in a small valley not more than ninety kilometres from Udaipur. The subtle hills surrounding the village seemed to offer it a calm shelter from the world. I had come to meet Mani Devi; a youthful, strong woman who had played a heroic role in saving Aamod's protected forest from near ruin. Walking towards her home, I felt as if I could have been a million miles from the nearest community.

Mani Devi has been recognised for her bravery, her determination, and her natural ability to inspire other women around her. It is clear she commands the respect of the women in her village. Even more impressive is her status among the men. She is a pioneer in her community and a wonderful model for future generations of women. Mani Devi has become a symbol of strength and empowerment, even if she may not have intended to be one. She was the first woman elected to the Van Suraksha Samiti (Forest Protection

Committee), created to protect the Kamalnath forest range of her village, and the year Seva Mandir introduced the Self Help Group (SHG) initiative she easily became group president. SHGs were created to empower women and teach them how to gain control over their personal economic condition, which in turn gives them greater social status. In this particular SHG, the women not only conducted meetings on how to save money, they addressed many other issues regarding family, health, marriage, education, and natural resources.

Aamod has an exceptional Forest Protection Committee entirely committed to protecting and nurturing the natural resources. Under Mani Devi's leadership, the committee has done excellent work in maintaining these forestlands. To date, there is a total of 1300 hectares (ha) of forestland, which is being managed and protected by the people of Aamod. Of those, 300 ha are completely restricted from any usage, including by the residents of Aamod. The remaining 1000 ha of forestland are set aside for villagers to graze their animals and collect fuel and fodder. Once a year, the entire community comes together and each household collects as much fuel and fodder as they require. Conservation practices of this kind are rarely seen in village communities in India because it is extremely difficult to put aside such large amounts of land without the presence of unity, vision, and strong leadership within the community.

Trespassing in forests by people of neighbouring villages is often a very serious problem. Regretfully, this is an issue that is sometimes exacerbated by women who trespass and cause problems for the men who patrol these lands. In

Aamod for example, neighbouring village women caught by patrolmen trying to steal fuel and fodder from Aamod's common lands would sometimes go back to their villages claiming they had been sexually abused in order to avoid punishment. Worse still, they might even make these false allegations if they had merely returned home empty handed! Such accusations can be far more harmful than the actual act of stealing fodder. The social implication of being accused of sexual abuse, especially in a small rural community, can divide communities and ruin people's lives. In order to resolve this problem, some communities such as Aamod, with the able leadership of Mani Devi, have begun to include women as part of the patrolling team. This endeavour proved to be extremely effective in overcoming the problem of trespassing and the illegal cutting of trees, especially by women from neighbouring villages.

To further ensure the integrity of the forestland, the villagers of Aamod, under the leadership of Mani Devi, also identified them as Sacred Groves. Sacred Groves are forest fragments of varying sizes which are communally protected and which usually have a significant religious connotation for the protecting community. In Sacred Groves, any sort of logging is prohibited. The villagers sprinkled saffron around the entire forestland and performed other rituals at three Sacred Groves sites situated inside the forest area. This initiative proved very effective amongst local villagers as the faith in the forests being sacred was reinstated.

Forests are a valuable resource that yields immediate profits, however, if a community also has a long-term vision

and understands the concepts within sustainable forest management, a stronger, healthier forest will be ensured into the future. It was no surprise then that Aamod was greener, with noticeably more flourishing trees and plants than any other village I had been to in Jhadol. Furthermore, this was the case at a time when the monsoon had barely even begun.

On that day, we had arrived a little early and were lucky enough to hear the tail end of a village meeting. The farmers had come together to discuss land rights. Seeing this, coupled with the lush and healthy surroundings, I immediately sensed the active and unified energy of this community. At the risk of over generalizing, I have learned that, where there is a healthy forest, there is usually a healthy community.

After the meeting dissolved, Mani Devi and two other women sat down with us under a large tree in the centre of her village. During the first interview, she did not look at me, and kept her face fully covered. It felt as though the two women who sat with us were her bodyguards. I recognized this as an indication of her uncertainty, and the fact that my translator was the voice she understood. In a follow up interview some time later, however, in the comfort of her own home, I discovered the laughing, smiling, and quite talkative side of Mani Devi I had heard so much about.

Mani Devi was recognised for her leadership after playing an integral role in saving Aamod's common lands from near destruction. In Aamod, it is common practice for the women to stay at home when there are weddings in neighbouring villages, as only men are allowed to attend these events. One evening happened to be a particularly festive one,

with the celebration of four weddings occurring at once! Needless to say, this left the village nearly entirely void of any men. Incredulously, of all the nights of the year, that night a forest fire ignited in the common lands. Seeing and smelling this fire from her home, at the same time being cognizant of her social duty to remain within doors, Mani Devi was faced with a choice; she could either wait until the men returned from the neighbouring village, thereby endangering the longevity of the common lands, or she could break social etiquette and courageously engage with the fire. Much like myself at the foot of the broken bridge, she had the choice to remain where she was, or attempt to navigate a threatening and potentially very dangerous situation in order to achieve a goal. A broken bridge and the uncertainty of leaving the comfort of our vehicle to cross a new and potentially dangerous territory by foot, although frightening and intimidating, was something we needed to do in order to continue along our road. Had we given in to fear and trepidation, we would never have gotten anywhere.

Mani Devi understood this very clearly; without hesitation she had to act, not only as an individual but also because she owed it to her community. She beat a large drum to alert the other members of the community. Once the alarm was heard, others spread the word and began to organise themselves for the late night battle against one of nature's most dangerous forces. All the women and children who were physically able, came together to cut the leaves from low lying palm trees and used them to smother the flames. Not only did she successfully combat and extinguish a blazing forest fire in the middle of the night, Mani Devi mobilised the women and

children in her village to come together and find strength in numbers. Her personal strength and ability to mobilise her community saved Aamod and neighbouring villages from a disaster of potentially devastating proportions.

Although it is easy to identify the stopping of the forest fire as the act, which distinguishes Mani Devi from the rest, it was not the forest fire alone. For, although leaving our vehicle and walking across the broken bridge was what highlighted the importance of being adaptive and open to the idea of confronting dangerous situations, it was not the act itself which made that clear. Rather, it was the act of *deciding* to walk across that bridge. Mani Devi made a choice. Her decision to act was enough. Whether she had saved Aamod's common lands or not, she exhibited the qualities that make her a strong and capable leader. She is adaptive, courageous and confident, undeterred by obstacles along the road.



Remaining Calm

Travelling in India can be taxing. More than once I found myself so tightly crammed into a bus, I felt as though if my legs were to give way I would still remain in the exact position, held up by the pressure of my fellow passengers. This claustrophobic sensation can set off the fight and flight instinct simultaneously, such that I could find myself equally moved to run out of the bus as to stay and push people away for air. Of course, the trick was to remain calm. Because I stood out like a sore thumb, people would sometimes find my presence comical, and their reaction often helped assuage my distress, but most of the work was done in my mind. I found it invaluable to remain strong and keep my composure at times like these. Even if the journey is long, tiring and frustrating it was always worth it when I arrived. And in those times when I did give into my feelings, I would flee the bus only to find myself waiting on the side of the road for another bus to come equally as packed. I would be on that journey with more discomfort than I wanted either way, so it was always better to persist in spite of my surroundings. It would make my destination that much more significant and meaningful when I got there.



Kanku Bai



The Tata car I was riding in that day came to a stop in front a small blue building with a traditionally thatched roof: the village store. We arrived just as school was getting out. Children dressed in blue uniforms were gathering around the storefront. As I walked towards the store, some children panicked and ran, some stopped doing whatever it was they were doing and stared, others smiled and waved enthusiastically, while others still came right up to me and said, “*Namasteji!*”

I was used to this mixed reaction by children. I often used my camera at such times to solicit smiles from those children daring enough to let me take their picture. In India, I found the camera to be an excellent icebreaker. Especially with children, where there was an even larger language barrier. The reaction of a child seeing a photograph or video of himself or herself for the first time is extraordinary. In that one moment, I would feel like a magician who had pulled off his final and most fantastic act, when all is revealed and the audience is full of

shock, doubt, astonishment, curiosity, and bewilderment. Without the stage to protect you, you might soon find yourself surrounded by a mob of children begging for their picture to be taken: an impossibly difficult situation to extricate yourself from. Of course, here too, the trick was to remain calm!

A smiling Kanku Bai, the leader I had come to see, greeted my partner and I warmly once we got to the store. She gestured for us to sit on the khaat, a traditional style bed, inside her store. Straight to business, we quickly began talking about how she became the Sarpanch of her village. As she spoke, she also attended her shop, which was modestly stocked with items such as small hand rolled cigarettes, nuts, crackers and sugar.

In 1995, still in her early twenties, Kanku Bai was elected Sarpanch of her village, Mohamad Falasia, in Jhadol block. Her greatest struggle at the time was her lack of experience, she explained. Yet, she was undeterred by these feelings and was confident that she could learn and be successful. Her natural curiosity, her ability to pick up things quickly and her undeterred resolve were reflected in her rise to such a prominent position. I was immediately interested to learn more about how exactly she became Sarpanch.

“At what age did you start attending school?” I asked.

“I started to attend Seva Mandir’s night school from the age of twelve. However, I was too young to officially enrol in class. It wasn’t until I was fourteen when I officially enrolled myself.”

“Not many twelve year olds would choose to go from a long tiring day of work to sitting in a classroom, especially when

work entailed walking for miles to collect fuel and fodder for the family. What inspired you to go to the classes?" I asked.

"I loved to learn. The students use to create games and competitions to see who could read faster, or do a mathematical calculation first. I really enjoyed playing."

"Do you think this sort of competitive environment encouraged you to become more active in the community?"

"Yes, I believe those sorts of games and competitions inspired me to work harder and gave me the confidence to work at a higher level in the community."

Listening to Kanku Bai talk about how she had spent her days working hard in the fields and then going to school in the evening, I kept envisioning myself on a crammed bus in the middle of a summer heat wave, feeling overwhelmed by it all. How overwhelmed must she have felt at times, yet she kept pushing, even fighting, to get on that bus that I so often found myself trying to flee. Unknown to her at the time, it was her desire to learn and her determination that would lead her to become one of her community's most respected, effective, and prominent figures to this day.

Not long after Kanku Bai finished the night course, she found that the community's perception of her had begun to change.

"They now started to see me as an educated and capable woman," she told me.

She continued to learn by engaging in conversations with the elders of the community, attending caste panchayat or community meetings, and engaging in other Seva Mandir

activities. Her community soon grew to believe in her as an educator; so much so, that they placed a request with Seva Mandir, without Kanku Bai's knowledge, to have her become a teacher. Seva Mandir interviewed Kanku Bai shortly after receiving this request and, just as quickly, gave her the position of Anudeshika (the official title of a night-time instructor). It was a great honour for Kanku Bai.

At the age of sixteen, Kanku Bai was the only female instructor in the area. Being an instructor had one major and important consequence; Kanku Bai became one of the very few women to start leaving the village on a regular basis for trainings. This seemingly simple act brought a greater perspective on life for Kanku Bai. She gained confidence from being able to be independent outside of her community. She was quick to say how helpful and comforting the other instructors had been to her when she was away from her village. She loved her role as a teacher, even though it was only in the evenings and for a few months at a time, with a meagre salary of one hundred rupees or just two dollars per month.

In 1992, Seva Mandir asked Kanku Bai to work in its Women's Development Program as a cluster worker. A cluster worker is responsible for supporting the work on women's empowerment in a number of women's groups in a given Gram Panchayat. A Gram Panchayat is the lowest unit of local governance, which may include one or more villages, depending on the population of each village. Her natural ability to lead, and the respect she commanded within her village, made her an ideal candidate for such a project. She successfully facilitated education camps, health drives and women's awareness groups,

demonstrating that she was an effective, compassionate, and trustworthy leader.

Three years later, in 1995, she was elected Sarpanch and thrust into the political arena where she would be met with great success, as well as many disappointments. One might think that in a society where women are treated as second-class citizens, and are viewed as inferior to men, having a female Sarpanch would be nearly unthinkable. This would very well be the case, if it were not for a law that required every third Sarpanch to be a woman. This law was created in 1992 to help empower women and elevate their social status by ensuring adequate representation, an unfortunately needed decree due to inherent sexism within the political arena. Although this law exists, it does not always result in the intended outcome. In many cases, for example, the elected woman is turned into a puppet leader as her husband or some other influential male actually makes all the decisions for her. However, this, very fortunately, was not the case with Kanku Bai!

The first two years were a major learning experience for her and she was blessed to have an Up Sarpanch (Vice Sarpanch) and Sachiv (Secretary) who mentored and supported her with respect. Kanku Bai quickly recognized that she drew strength from numbers. She recalled how she would take four other female Sarpanchs from neighbouring villages whenever she needed to go to the district-level government office or deal with higher officials. Friendships like these helped her in the early part of her term as Sarpanch. Indeed, her natural tendency to include others in all that she does is a fundamental aspect of her ability to lead.

Soon after she was elected Sarpanch, Kanku Bai noted the need for a primary health centre in the village. She diligently applied for and received permission from the local authorities to build the centre. When the Sarpanch from a neighbouring village heard about Ms. Kanku Bai's plan, he decided that he wanted the centre to be in his village. Furthermore, he was a member of the political party that was in power, while Kanku Bai belonged to the opposition party. He approached the governor of the state and was quickly able to have the entire project moved to his village. Kanku Bai spent the next year and a half in court fighting the case. In the end, however, her village lost the case and with it, the primary health centre. Kanku Bai was so upset by this experience she had to be hospitalised.

This case is disturbing on many levels, and stands as a prime example of corrupt practices preventing people from using the legal system to protect themselves. Nevertheless, when the party Kanku Bai belonged came to power three years later, she managed to receive a new sanction to build a primary health centre and carry out the original project in her village; a testimony to her spirit and determination. Kanku Bai recalled the building of the health centre as one of her most rewarding projects. She laughed while telling me that many years after she built the centre she told everybody, "Look we have a primary health centre in our village even though we lost the case".

Kanku Bai spoke about how hard it was for her to deal with corruption as Sarpanch. She was pained to say that she was forced "to pay in order to play" at times. I asked her what would have happened if she had refused to pay those who demanded a little extra on the side. Her response was simple

and to the point: “If you don’t give commission to the higher authorities, they will not help you. If you require a sanction or a cheque, they will not give it to you, and they may even actively delay work in your area”. This was plainly visible in Kanku Bai’s experience with the health centre, where she refused to participate in corrupt acts.

As an elected leader, one has to make difficult decisions. In some instances, Kanku Bai went against her own sense of right and wrong in order to protect and improve her community. Daily, she wrestled with the question of whether she should make a stand against this greater evil, and risk isolating herself and her community in the process, or to play by their “rules” and accomplish as much as she could for her community. It is unfortunate that Kanku Bai and many others like her are often forced to compromise their own morals for the betterment of the community. I could not help but question, however, if giving into these demands was just perpetuating this culture of corruption. Where should the fight against corruption begin? Should leaders like Kanku Bai take it upon themselves to refuse the ultimatums of corrupt officials, or should higher authorities be the ones to fight this corruption?

Kanku Bai once said, “A single individual cannot deal with this problem of corruption. If everyone comes together then something can be done about it. Then the situation can be controlled.” Yet, I wonder, how does that unity come about? Are only the villagers from Mohamad Falasia required? Or do residents from a number of villages in Jhadol block need to come together?

The question of how best to combat corruption in cases such as these is like the question of the chicken and the egg. Do people need to stop asking for bribes first, or do they need to stop giving into them first? It is most likely a combination of the two; once people stop asking, people will stop giving, and likewise, once people stop giving, people will stop asking. Hence, in Kanku Bai's case, although she admits to having given in to bribery, it is notable that she hasn't perpetuated the system by taking bribes herself, thus taking a stand against such practices by refusing to partake in active corruption. If more leaders like Kanku Bai are elected into power, this could have a powerful impact, perhaps creating a ripple large enough to cause a wave against the entire culture of corruption itself.

Kanku Bai had to be patient, and bear the discomfort of an infuriating experience that she could not do much about. Through her patience and faith, she eventually built the health centre in her village. It reminds me of how at times we have to endure difficult and uncomfortable journeys to get to the places we want to reach. Furthermore, it is the endurance of those very journeys that can make the destination so rewarding. In Kanku Bai's case, having not given up on her conviction that her village needed a health centre, and having built it after such a long and arduous campaign, heightened the sense of accomplishment. Her sense of accomplishment aside, however, the ability to remain calm in the face of challenges along the road led her to achieve great and invaluable things for her community.





Avenues of Creativity

Without a doubt, India is one of the most creative cultures I have ever encountered. Roads are avenues of outright creativity. In a country with so many people, moving a multitude of people from one place to another as efficiently as possible is high on the list of priorities. It didn't take a long time being in Udaipur before I come across a bus overflowing with an unbelievably staggering number of people. If there is an inch of space to be found in the inside of the cabin or on the rooftop, someone will be placed or perched there. If there is some way to hang off the back or side of the bus, someone will be balanced there. But buses are not the only vehicles used in this manner. Jeeps, tractors, motorcycles, scooties, and even bicycles are all too often filled way beyond their carrying capacity with people. This is what necessity dictates: creative and incredulous solutions. Having said as much, it's always frightening to see an entire family on a frail bicycle! Indeed, I might be tempted to label the practice unsafe and, although it truly can be, the other option is for everyone to walk, making their journey that much longer and arduous.



Keshulal Kher



Uncovering Mr. Keshulal Kher's past is as amazing as it is impressive. It is quite remarkable listening to all of his achievements, awards, and innovative entrepreneurial undertakings. His slow and over relaxed mannerisms immediately confirm the artist inside of him. His posture and tone of voice embody the folk artist he gladly professed to be, and I believe it was the artist in him that immediately put my partner and I at ease. His expressive eyebrows danced magical dances with his zealous hand gestures, as if each movement were a scene in a play. His cool, easy traits, his half-sitting/half-lying down gesture similar to that of a nobleman relaxing on a mountain of pillows, all made me feel like I was in the presence of a great artisan. His humour not only lit up his own face, but those of everyone in the room. Often, at times like these, I was left with a feeling of great sadness; how could I ever do justice to a man like this through the use of words?

It is the artist inside him that has inspired, enabled, and empowered him to address social problems, political predicaments, and development issues. He believes that, although meetings and speeches are the common means to discuss development issues, most people find them boring and are uninterested in them. This has encouraged him to create awareness through more creative means such as cultural programs, puppet shows, plays, and music. For example, he had a theatre troop that he travelled with to different communities in India, performing plays and music, to address social and development issues such as immunization, alcohol abuse and issues related to the youth.

As a young boy, he always found himself naturally attracted to cultural activities, education and sports such as football and Kabbadi (a capture-the-flag-esc game). At first, his parents were quite reluctant to send him to school. Often the need for an extra pair of working hands is more important and necessary, and it can be hard for parents who have not been well integrated into the education system to see the benefits of sending a child to school. In Keshulal's case, it took a lot of convincing and determination on his behalf until his parents finally agreed to send him to school. Sadly, however, school is where Keshulal had his first encounters with caste discrimination. Being from a particular caste, he was not allowed to drink from the same Matka (water jug) as others of higher castes. If he wanted water, he had to ask a boy from a different caste to serve him water, and even then he was only permitted to drink by cupping his hands. In India, practices like this are more common than one would like to believe. I cannot help but think how many of the individuals in this book could

have been considered untouchable and automatically dismissed as being of no significance to society purely because of their caste, when in truth they are talented and wonderful souls that stand as the warriors on the frontline of so many of India's development issues. And I know, without a doubt, that many of the communities Seva Mandir works in are thriving because of these very individuals.

Keshulal's introduction into community development work was through a small organization called Rajasthan Vidyapeeth. Rajasthan Vidyapeeth is a community-based organisation that focuses on educating communities in and around Udaipur. Working as a teacher in this organization, Keshulal taught adults to write their names and sign their signatures. This eventually led him to working on a mobile library where he brought books to villages in an effort to increase literacy rates. It was not long before he questioned why Rajasthan Vidyapeeth focused only on education. Through word of mouth and by running into the occasional Seva Mandir worker, he learned of Seva Mandir's more holistic approach to development, which intrigued him. For Keshulal, it was not enough to focus just on education. He recognized that rural communities faced many other developmental issues such as health, governance, and natural resource use which, along with education, all needed to be addressed.

In 1986 Keshulal met a man named Mr. Kishore who became a source of great inspiration to him. Mr. Kishore, formerly an associate of Seva Mandir, had since started another group, called Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal, focused primarily on forest protection and women's empowerment within local

communities. Being given the opportunity to work with this group, Keshulal soon became acquainted with these issues. The group's understanding that forests were integral to the survival of these communities, coupled with the observation that they were slowly being depleted, motivated them to educate villagers to protect and promote the continued growth and health of this vital asset.

Keshulal's approach to this problem of deforestation is a great example of his leadership ability. He spoke of how everyone was cutting trees in his community; the rich, the poor, higher castes, lower castes. They would all partake in this culling, unaware of the consequences such an act had. One day, when asking people to stop cutting trees, a man asked in a very simple but poignant way, "Then what shall I do? How do I make an income?"

How do you tell someone to stop something, which although may result in a long-term benefit, may strip them of their current means of survival? This question bothered Keshulal, who finally decided to approach the Tehsil (local government office) to find a solution. The government, however, did not want to address the problem, and Keshulal and his group were met with animosity. Yet, Keshulal was not deterred and decided to try a different tactic, by involving women. Empowering women, who are normally kept out of political issues such as these, was an uncommon and insightful solution. As with automobiles on the road in India, Keshulal perceived a solution that involved a degree of creativity, calling upon his ability to think outside the box.

When the women went to the Tehsil, the official they had an appointment with “conveniently” sent one of his staff to explain that he had to miss the appointment because his eyes were paining. Upon hearing this, the women turned around and told his staff something far more honest and powerful, “His eyes might be paining, but here our stomachs are paining us. Give us employment and we will stop cutting trees.” This alarmed the Tehsil worker and eventually led the official to initiate some employment schemes under the forest and the Public Works Departments (PWD). Although tree cutting has not completely stopped, it has been greatly reduced, and the situation is now improving for both the land and the community. Sometimes unconventional (although occasionally risky) actions, like placing a person on a roof or hanging out of the window of a bus, can make sure more people get to their destinations more efficiently. Even though the act of sending women to the Tehsil was not very risky or dangerous, Keshulal used an unconventional solution to solve one of the more important problems his village had faced.

In 1995, when Keshulal was elected Sarpanch of Bagunda, he was also working with Seva Mandir. It was in this position that Keshulal’s true colours were seen. During his term, he was able to construct roads and aqueducts for water conservation, get widows their due pensions, and build community housing and health centres. He did this all transparently, honestly, and with the understanding that, as Sarpanch, his duty was to serve those who elected him and not to steal from or deceive them. Sometimes, as a human, I feel like crying because we have somehow come to the point where we must applaud those who simply do what they are supposed

to. The sad truth is that finding honest, selfless leaders who work for the communities they were once a part of and struggled with, is very rare.

This is by no means to say Keshulal is a perfect leader. All beings and all leaders have their faults. In fact, Keshulal recounted a time when he found himself using force in order to achieve his objective. So much of what we talk about in this sector is against promoting violence, yet here I was sitting next to a very respected and influential man who explained to me that although using force was wrong, it was effective. I was of course intrigued to learn more about this case. The situation arose because Keshulal wanted the local Panchayat to give the community land, which was rightfully theirs in the first place, to plant trees. However, the permission was not coming through due to the corrupt practices of this office. In a moment of weakness and frustration, Keshulal grabbed the collar of the Sachiv (secretary to the panchayat) and shook him. This forceful act scared the Sachiv and ultimately led to him granting permission to develop the land.

How does one interpret a story like this? As a leader Keshulal recognised that this was not a behaviour that should be promoted or in anyway lauded. He felt badly about having lost his temper; however, he recognized the efficacy of what he did. It makes me ask myself - does corruption need to be held by the collar every once in a while to keep it in check? It is not long before one can reason out the many dangers of taking such actions however. For this reason, many say such means should never be used. Keshulal knows this too, and acknowledges that what he did was wrong and talks about it so that others can

learn from such things. This is indeed a quality to be praised. Not many people will freely offer a stranger like myself, or even a friend, both their good and bad qualities.

In many ways, this honesty reminds me of the buses in India. Although perhaps creative and resourceful, offering efficient and quick ways to transport large numbers of people, we cannot overlook the dangers they can pose. Yet, in understanding these dangers and in being honest about them, we evade the mistake of deluding ourselves into thinking these solutions are perfect. Rather we recognize them for what they are, highlight their positive aspects, and continue to mend their negative ones. A good leader is not only honest with his or her community, but with him or herself, continually attempting to improve for the betterment of the people they serve.





Rocky Roads

I remember travelling through Kotra once and seeing a line of rocks and small boulders placed in the middle of the road. My partner at the time turned around to me and said, “It’s not uncommon for thieves (or ‘pirates’ as he referred to them) to set up road blocks like the ones we just passed.” I recall the driver nervously pushing through the rocks at high speed. Sometimes you can’t be afraid to continue even if you know danger is lurking around the corner hidden from sight. Kotra has a reputation for being the most dangerous block Seva Mandir works in. However, if you let fear guide you on the road, you will not make it very far. In this particular case, we were in no immediate peril, yet the rocks stood as reminders that there are indeed real and unpredictable dangers on the road.



Hakar Chand



We approached the village of Jekda in Jhadol block, in the afternoon. I had come here to speak to Hakar Chand. We left the car by the road, and I ran along a narrow rocky path fenced by thorny plants. It was a blistering afternoon in Jhadol and the sun briefly taunted my sanity as I cut through the heat towards Hakar Chand's home. This simple act of walking from one house to another served as a reminder that life in these communities is harsh, even if the dwellers may make it look bucolic to the visitor.

Approaching Hakar Chand's house, I notice a proudly displayed communist flag on his roof. The first time I came across a communist flag I was quite surprised, having been unaware of the Maoist influence over tribal and lower caste Hindus. Yet I soon learned that one often-cited reason for such an ideological shift is to avoid caste discrimination. It is not uncommon for a lower caste family to convert to Buddhism or

Christianity in the hopes of escaping the prejudice that caste rivalry can cause. Even though it is unclear how well this specific attempt to avoid caste discrimination works, the overall situation is slowly improving through a number of secular initiatives. That being said, certain policies towards affirmative action to improve an individual's status within society can lead to a change in the power structure, but not necessarily create a more equitable system overall. For example, in a village like Jekda, even though the difference between the richest and poorest man is relatively small, all the Schedule Tribe and Schedule Caste families will have certain advantages over higher caste groups when applying for school. However, many higher caste families in India are still below the poverty line. Not providing them the same economic benefits as the lower caste families can eventually lead to a similarly unacceptable form of discrimination.

Hakar Chand greeted us with great enthusiasm. His home is situated in an exquisite setting, blessed with rolling hills and green forests on all sides. We sat in the garden surrounding the house, under the shade of a great old tree. Talking to Hakar Chand is like sitting down with a patient philosopher. He is relaxed, confident and has a glamorous presence about him. His distinctive face, with deep inset eyes, and a gaunt jaw line, is overwhelmed by his massive smile and infectious laugh. I could see Hakar Chand took great pride from these interviews. His soft spoken voice is overpowered by his passionate and elaborate gestures, as if he were sculpting sentences out of the air. I thanked him for welcoming us into his home. He explained to me how his fellow villagers had actually built this brick house

for him in appreciation of his outstanding work as a Sarpanch. A brick house is a luxury few can afford, but many desire.

As a young boy, Hakar Chand worked as a labourer for many years. However, he was not satisfied with just being a labourer and he made up his mind to one day attain his boss's position as Mate. A Mate is a person who oversees all the labourers on a construction site, much like a foreman in western society. A certain degree of education is required to qualify for such a position, and Hakar Chand had not yet attended school. Being born into one of the poorest families in the village, his options were limited. It would have been easy and quite understandable for Hakar Chand to have been deterred by the daunting task ahead of him, however his confidence helped him push through the roadblocks that lay ahead.

One could posit that Hakar Chand's greatest assets at this time were his desire to improve his position and the belief in himself to do so. In order to get money for their school supplies, Hakar Chand and his cousin started to illegally cut down trees for fuel, which they would then sell. With the money, he was able to buy the supplies he needed for school, such as a chalkboard and a kerosene lantern. Within 10 days of attending class, he was able to write the entire Hindi alphabet! His schooling, coupled with Seva Mandir's adult literacy programs created for 14 year olds and above, helped to slowly educate him. Afterwards, he joined Seva Mandir's Adult Literacy Camp and soon began to solidify his relationship with Seva Mandir.

Today he has a 5th grade pass certificate and intends to take the 8th grade standard exam under Satat Shiksha, a government run literacy program spanning 12 grades. Going from one of the most marginalised families of his community to being an elected Sarpanch is no small feat and would not have been possible without his great determination. Yet, even though he was elected Sarpanch, he still faced a great deal of resistance from powerful figures and higher caste groups with more social clout. His ability to engage with others and not be easily ruffled, however, enabled him to create meaningful working relationships, even with his critics.

When I asked him how Seva Mandir had helped him in his career, he almost took it as an offensive question. He said he would always work for Seva Mandir regardless of pay, describing his own relationship with Seva Mandir much like that of a parent and child. His tone was one of gratitude, appreciation and admiration. He believes the most fundamental part of his education or training from Seva Mandir was the confidence it built within him, a sentiment shared by many other leaders I met on my journey. Through these leaders Seva Mandir instils confidence in communities as a whole, which gives them the power and the belief to push through seemingly impassable junctions where fear may have otherwise stopped them.

The education that Hakar Chand speaks of is not just formal education, but years of relevant trainings, programs, and events conducted by Seva Mandir. This process and these camps and trainings are fundamental in creating strong, empowered leaders. And it is because of them that today Hakar

Chand, can proudly proclaim, “Though I don’t have a degree, I know more than many who do. Even learned people with MA degrees are doing petty jobs, but because of my education, which I gained from Seva Mandir and my experiences, I am doing a well paid job and a better job!” As he said this, his deep inset features seemed to all pull back, producing a smile that I more commonly associate with excited children. It was a beautiful and honest expression of gratitude and bewilderment.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that the act of illegally cutting down trees was Hakar Chand’s first major step toward being able to now protect and save those very lands. When Hakar Chand spoke of this, I couldn’t help but think of how those pirates in Kotra that are so often feared could one day turn into the very people who protect those roads. Perhaps we must refrain from being judgmental about those whom we fear until we take the time to understand and appreciate them. Today if a community member illegally cuts down trees, trespasses, or grazes their animals in the protected lands of Jekda, they could face harsh social sanctions and even banishment from the community. Although Hakar Chand never said this directly, I believe a large part of his work revolves around ensuring that his community members don’t have to steal in order to educate themselves as he did as a young child. For although one day, hopefully, the pirates in Kotra may come to be protectors of the road, it would be better if they had never been pirates in the first place.

Hence it is no surprise that one exemplary act that shows the type of leader Hakar Chand truly was, comes from his work with the Forest Protection Committee. In 2002, he was

elected president of the Jekda Forest Protection Committee (FPC), whose mission is to protect and develop forestlands. During his tenure, a major dispute erupted between Jekda and a neighbouring village, Aamod, over a boundary wall. Tensions were very high and each community felt the other was taking advantage of the situation. Both were passionate about their positions and unwilling to compromise. Additionally, a political party from Kherad, another bordering village, was adding fuel to the fire by encouraging their people to encroach on the disputed land in an effort to make their own claims on it. In Kherad, a communist leader was provoking the villagers to encroach upon the forestland of Jekda. The dispute was escalating and creating ill will between neighbouring villages. Without a quick resolution, the forest was in danger of becoming degraded from overuse, encroachments, and neglect.

Hakar Chand recognised the severity of the problem and was quick to react. He assembled the Regional Forest Officer, the local Patwari (Government Revenue Officer), and members of the FPC from both villages to discuss and resolve the issue as fairly and quickly as possible. By including powerful officials from the government and members of both local village committees, a surprisingly simple and seemingly obvious solution, he ensured that all parties were represented and heard. It also made certain that once a decision was agreed upon, members of neither community would be able to declare it unfair or invalid. As a result, and because of the way Hakar Chand handled the boundary dispute, 250 hectares of land are now protected, and successfully shared by both communities.

Hakar Chand explained that educating people so they know what is rightfully theirs is only one part of the battle. Forest protection work requires patience and an understanding that the rewards will be beneficial to the community in the long run, but not necessarily immediately. Getting enough support from the community to engage in long term projects is extremely challenging, especially when so many are living on a day to day basis, unsure of where their next meal will come from. One aspect of the leader's job is to communicate clearly what the problem is, why the problem impacts everyone in the village, and how the solution can be beneficial. This is no simple task. Essentially, people are being told to work for others and to work for tomorrow if they want to create a stronger and better today. Restoring degraded common lands takes time and often requires a lengthy period of up to 2-3 years, during which those lands are untouchable. However, for a farmer to stop grazing his cattle on the common lands for even a year can feel like a death sentence to some. Hence, a large part of Hakar Chand's task is to instil a sense of faith and belief in his community that his work, although perhaps not immediately beneficial, will be profitable for everyone in the long run.

Most recently, Hakar Chand has begun to focus much of his work outside of his village in order to bring awareness, and promote the creation of FPCs in other communities. One community he works in is the Kotra block. It could take anywhere between 4 and 6 hours by bus from Jhadol to Kotra. Kotra block has a reputation for being lawless, and very unpredictable. Just as my friend told me, there are endless stories of local 'pirates' raiding and robbing vehicles, often beating up the passengers regardless of how much they

cooperate. It is the only block in which Seva Mandir staff are required to stop fieldwork by 4pm so as not to travel at night. Unsurprisingly, it is also one of the blocks in Udaipur that is the most in need of basic development. Having said as much, although its roads, electricity grid and government services, such as education and health, are all lacking, it has better forests and agriculture lands than all other blocks in the vicinity.

In Kotra, Hakar Chand found himself being warned by fellow co-workers about a village called Kookawas. His colleagues tried passionately to dissuade him from going there and warned him that thieves prowled the area. Up to that point, no one from the FPC had been able to enter the village, and most saw it as a lost cause. Hakar Chand, however, would not give up so easily.

“I sent a message to a man in that village to meet me the next day,” he told me. “When he arrived, I put him in the front seat of my car and we drove to his village without any problems.” Hakar Chand explained that the villagers might have thrown rocks at his car or attempted to dissuade him entering had he been alone, but was confident they would not have done so if one of their own was with him. As long as Hakar Chand was with this man, he surmised, he would remain safe. Indeed, in the end, not only did he manage to make it to Kookawas and back with everything intact, he managed to create a Forest Protection Committee there as well. Hakar Chand laughs at the fact that it was the very people who were notorious for being thieves and robbers in Kookawas who came forward in the end and took on the initiative with confidence and appreciation!

I can't help but think, "What if every time someone came across a road block they stopped and turned around in fear?" Would Hakar Chand ever have become the leader he is today? Would the pirates never have come to embrace FPC? A community like Kookawas could have been left to ruin because of preconceptions and fears when, on closer look, it seems that they too were calling out for help. The road blocks that my friend pointed out to me that day in Kotra seem to be a hindrance just as much to communities needing help like Kookawas, as to people like Hakar Chand trying to help them. Through individuals like Hakar Chand who challenge and confront these barriers, communities can both thrive and change and, perhaps more importantly, learn how to help themselves.





Breaking Down

Once, on the way home from the field one day, we were faced with the inconvenience of having a flat tire. This sort of thing was not uncommon. Actually, I soon began to expect things like this. Nonetheless, it's never something you want to deal with at the end of a long tiring day. All too many times I have been in cars with no spares, but gratefully we did have a spare this time! We all helped the driver fix the tire, but as we hoisted up the car on a flimsy jack I couldn't help but think how frustrating it was to watch all the jeeps, and buses passing by. Breakdowns always leave you with a sort of helpless feeling, even if the solution is simple. Little did we know, however, that on that particular day the journey would really test our patience. For, fifteen minutes later, we were on the road again, only to have our spare tire go flat too! By this time it was pitch black and the only thing we could see were the headlights of cars zooming by. I found myself feeling helpless and lost but realised that no break down is so big that it can't be conquered in one way or another. Luckily, we were only an hour away from town, so we called a friend to come and pick us up. And sure enough after a couple of hours of being stuck on the side of the road we made it home.



Ramesh Meena



Getting to Ramesh Meena's house was a jaw-dropping journey with exhilarating views of the Aravalli mountain range. India's oldest mountain range, the Aravalli in the north west of India runs for about 300 hundred miles and cuts through parts of three of India's western states; Rajasthan, Gujarat and Haryana. These mountains can be as severe as they can be gentle, and it might be easy to write them off at times as mere hills in the distance. However, on the way to Ramesh's house the view of the mountains in the distance resembled something more like that of a turbulent sea, static in time.

The area near Ramesh Meena's house was quite barren and void of trees, with thin and rocky soil. Conditions were less than ideal for agriculture. I have often noticed barren lands juxtaposed by thriving patches of well-irrigated, protected

lands. How is it that, in an agriculturally based society, some lands are almost entirely neglected, while others remain so important? I have wondered if perhaps greed and power play large roles in this context, severely diminishing natural resource protection and increasing social injustices.

Ramesh Meena was the youngest of the grassroots leaders I met. His youthful energetic spirit and charming personality was evident in his many accomplishments. Finding strong second line leaders like Ramesh is not easy because most young and eager youths would rather leave the village for the excitement of the city. Ramesh Meena remembered a time when every household in his community would give one rupee to any family who needed medical attention. He recalled how it filled him with joy when the money actually helped cure someone. It was through these seemingly small efforts that Ramesh Meena recognized his personal enjoyment in helping others. He is one of very few individuals who passed the 12th standard at school, but still chose to remain directly involved in his community, to take on responsibility and fighting to strengthen his village (After 12th standard, Ramesh Meena married and his responsibilities shifted towards his new family, making it impossible to take his studies any further even though he always dreamt of doing so). Intrinsically attracted to helping others, he worked to improve the standard of living not only for his family, but also for his entire community.

Ramesh's association with Seva Mandir started after his studies in the year 2000. Through engagement with Seva Mandir, he fulfilled his dream to work for his village of Jhabla. His enthusiastic yet thoughtful presence enabled him to create

an atmosphere of trust and inspiration wherever he worked. To begin with, these qualities made him very effective in dealing with people both inside and outside of his community. He was comfortable talking to people of all age groups, even to a strange foreigner like myself. The respect he commanded from the elders of the village played a vital part to his success as a leader.

Ramesh Meena worked a great deal on natural resource protection. Indeed, Seva Mandir presented the Umed Mal Lodha Award to him for his exceptional work on the Joint Forest Management (JFM) site at Jhabla. The JFM program is a government scheme in which the forest department and the local village forest protection and management committee work together to develop a degraded forest. The benefits reaped from this partnership are distributed between the forest department and the village.

In the forestland of Jhabla, there were many encroachments. Ramesh, along with the village group, persuaded the encroachers to vacate their encroachments. This process continued for years, after which the encroachments from the forestland were finally all removed. As Ramesh Meena was among the few educated people in the village, he was appointed as a Mate to implement soil and water conservation work on the site. At the time he became involved in this work, there was an on-going attempt to build a wall around the JFM site in order to protect it. However, encroachers and trespassers from nearby villages were constantly damaging or destroying this wall. Convincing people to treat the JFM site with respect and importance was extremely difficult. As in the

many instances of change documented throughout this book, it is always hard to explain to people how long-term benefits can be just as important as short-term ones, even if they are not immediately visible.

I asked Ramesh Meena what he found to be the most challenging part of implementing change. His response was very telling of what makes him so effective as a leader. “When people sit together” he said, “and decide they are going to bring about change, the mentality of each person is not the same. Some agree, others will not. A person must be in a situation that does not prevent them from accepting change. It takes time to convince people so they realize the importance of change.” As a facilitator of change, Ramesh Meena realized that his job was to understand and respect the different reasons people find change inconvenient, or even impossible, as well as to educate them on the benefits different changes could bring. In this manner he was able to help individuals put their guards down and open themselves to effective change. Ramesh Meena also acknowledged that he, himself, had to change before he could expect it from others. For Ramesh, change is truly a process of give and take. He is constantly trying to improve himself in order to be more effective in helping others. Thankfully, his conception of self-improvement does not come from a measure of popularity, but rather from a sense of morality.

Ramesh Meena was continuously pursuing initiatives and projects, such as helping to introduce new productive farming techniques, promoting education, and developing proper health care. Ramesh’s qualities as a leader, such as determination and forward vision, have served him well.

However, his recognition that respect and dignity are fundamental in the process of community work and social change has also helped him. Ramesh Meena said, “Another man’s dignity is as important as your own. If you respect others, they will respect you.” This attitude, although not always reciprocated, has kept Ramesh Meena an honest, transparent, and respected leader.

At the time of my visit, Ramesh Meena faced a potentially dangerous situation in Jhabla with regards to the development of some land. The issue had started when Ramesh Meena ran for Sarpanch in 2004. Even though he lost, it was clear he had a strong support base, which gave him hope in attempting to run for the next election. In 2010, the next election was approaching and the Sarpanch began to undermine Ramesh Meena in every possible way. Much worse for the community, however, was the fact that the Sarpanch was also making false promises in return for votes. The Sarpanch encouraged families to encroach on the JFM areas of Jhabla, promising he would get them titles to these encroached lands. He cited a new law under which this could be made possible. Hence, they believed the Sarpanch and continued to make further encroachments.

This form of corruption completely undermined the efforts of the Jhabla Forest Protection Committee led by Ramesh. The Sarpanch in Jhabla manipulated villagers’ desperation and ignorance to influence their voting decision. Despair can lead good people down the wrong path, and some were forced to make hard and uninformed decisions. The tragedy was that those who encroached on the JFM site after

2005, even with the Sarpanch's approval, would never actually receive the land as promised, but the Sarpanch would receive their vote.

In the end, unfortunately, the Sarpanch was indeed re-elected. Unperturbed by this (much unlike myself on the side of that road after our second flat!), Ramesh Meena continued to work on informing his fellow villagers about their collective rights and what the Sarpanch can or cannot promise them, hoping they would not so easily submit to these shameful political manoeuvres again. Ramesh Meena said he felt comforted in knowing that he spoke the truth, and prayed that the truth would save people from being manipulated. Equally important, he hoped the JFM sites that he worked so hard to protect would remain safe. In spite of his misfortunes, he continued along the road he had chosen, with whatever resources he had, and pushed on. Perhaps none of the qualities I have mentioned distinguishing Ramesh Meena would mean anything if he hadn't had the determination and strength to carry on in the face of repeated adversity. Just as our work in the field would have meant nothing if we had thrown in the towel after our second flat, Ramesh's efforts would have been for naught had he given up after being dealt a poor hand. Leadership is not for the faint hearted; one must persevere.





The Confident Driver

One of the most fundamental qualities needed in order to safely navigate the roads in India is confidence. Learning to drive a motorcycle in India taught me this lesson almost instantly. It was the first time I was driving in India, which was probably just as scary for other road users as it was for me! I became immediately aware of the potential dangers a hesitating driver can cause. Understanding that you must remain confident and maintain the direction you are heading in, at all times, was crucial. Although this might sound counter-intuitive with so many drivers on the road, I quickly came to terms with the fact that I could not afford to pay too much attention to what other drivers were doing while at the same time concentrating on my driving. I remember once, when entering a roundabout, I tried to compensate for what I thought another driver was going to do instead of simply driving where I needed to go. I not only nearly killed him and myself but about 10 other people too! As backward as it seems, I had to train myself to be confident in my own driving and have faith that if I stay true to where I need to go, all else will fall in place. Not an easy task. Indeed, if you really want to test your confidence, I propose you attempt a roundabout in India on a motorcycle!



Jelki Bai



I first met Jelki Bai in a small town a few kilometres away from her village in the block of Kotra. Unbeknownst to me at the time, she was attending a Funeral at the time I arrived. I felt uncomfortable that she had left the ceremony to come and meet me. However, Jelki Bai made it clear that she did not mind as long as we did not take too much time. My partner and I were grateful for her company and we did our best to be efficient with her time. Saying that, it became immediately clear that she would be running this interview, not us! Before I even had the chance to confer with my translator to ask a question, she had already begun! This was very telling of Jelki Bai, and it did not take me long to see that the one thing this women exuded more than anything else was confidence. I began to wonder from where this confidence developed.

She was born in the neighbouring state of Gujarat, which shares the southern Rajasthan border. From a very young age she would help her parents with livestock rearing and household chores. She was married at the age of 18 to a man who lived in a small village in Kotra. Once she moved to Kotra, she began working in the agricultural fields. It was at this time that organizations such as Astha Sansthan, an NGO also from Udaipur working in community development, and Seva Mandir came and started organizing meetings in the village to help spread awareness about issues related to health, natural resources management, education, and governance.

One problem that became apparent was how people were cutting and stealing trees from Kotra's forest. Recognizing that they would be in serious peril if their forests were to be completely degraded, they actively sought help from the Government Forest Department. Working in Kotra, Seva Mandir helped the villagers gain a sense of land literacy, which enabled them to begin their battle against trespassers, and the illegal cutting of trees. Jelki Bai recalled how there was a time in her community when everyone was uneducated, and no one knew the laws of the land or their individual and collective rights. They did not know that different categories of land existed in the village or the rules governing them. In many cases, the land records were lost, and the encroachers invaded the land spaces that were common to all. Consequently, villages lost land that was rightfully and collectively theirs. She explained that they were so isolated that they were unaware of how the political system in India worked even at the most basic level.

Regardless of the whys or hows, this type of ignorance makes the villagers an easy target for exploitation. Sadly, in the case of Kotra, the Forest Department at the time took advantage of this. It is perhaps an all too ironic facet of society that the very things created for protection often lead to destruction. Weapons, cars, and technology, for example, all help but can also hurt the living things of this world. The Forestry Department in this instance was no different. Having been created to protect and nurture forests, some of its derelict functionaries played a large role in the destruction of that very resource.

Unfortunately, just being aware of your land boundaries is not always enough and often does not prevent trespassing. One major threat to Kotra was a company based out of Gujarat, which would come to the village, bribe some villagers, and cut whatever they could carry out. It became clear that some officials of the Forest Department were in cahoots with the Gujarat based company, as they would either dismiss the villagers' claims or simply avoid addressing the issue altogether. So the villagers took matters into their own hands. One day, they created a roadblock on the main connecting road, which prevented vehicles from illegally carrying out trees from the village. With this roadblock they successfully stopped 2-3 of such vehicles. They called the local officers of the Forest Department and filed an official complaint, yet the department still turned a blind eye and refused to take any action, apparently due to monetary favours from the loggers.

At this point, the villagers created a system that forced people to pay a fine if they were caught illegally logging. There

would be social repercussion for those offenders who were from the village and refused to pay; for offenders from outside the village, like the Gujarat based company, the village would stop them from leaving with the products through the continued use of roadblocks until the fines were paid. Jelki Bai played a pivotal role in the instalment and maintenance of this system, ensuring that compensation was rightly received. In this way, in spite of hesitating in the face of an unforgiving round of corruption and threatening forces, she boldly pushed forward, not only taking care of herself and her village, but also paving the way for natural resource development.

This case illustrates a process in which the practices of a community influenced officials of a government body like the Forest Department to change the way they worked by putting them in a position of accountability. As a matter of fact, when I drove up to Kotra, its dense forests immediately took me aback. To be perfectly honest, I was shocked. I felt like turning to my partner and saying “Now this is a forest!” The strength the villagers mustered in an effort to fight this particular case illustrates the power a unified community can have. I am certain this would never have been the case had it not been for Jelki Bai’s inherent confidence and determination in protecting her village’s natural resource.

During this time, Jelki Bai caught the attention of Seva Mandir and was asked if she would like to establish and lead a Women’s Resource Centre (WRC). She gladly took on the responsibility and excelled at it. She now works with hospitals and helps spread health education. She helped establish a Daal (*lentils*) mill located a few kilometres from her village, and

played an active role in a watershed program established to protect soil and prevent erosion. She noted that she found the greatest resistance from people in her work dealing with pensions for widows, pregnant women, and the handicapped. When she approached the Panchayat about this, they laughed and belittled her, to which she said 'Why are you discriminating? Women gave birth to you all, and that's why you are ruling right now. Everyone is equal and there should be no discrimination.'" At which point they fell silent and eventually passed her proposal through. Her lack of hesitation and her clarity of intentions have been key in her success. If she had hesitated even for a minute her proposal may have never made it through. Not too unlike the hesitations I initially felt at the precipice of a roundabout on my motorcycle, it made me wonder how much time had I lost just waiting for others to let me in when all I needed to do was have a little confidence and take my own initiative?

She explained that even now as the villagers become more and more aware of their rights, they still face great challenges. Their greatest challenge by far is their shortage of water, for which they are considering building a creek dam. Other problems are their lack of electricity, dearth of bathrooms and toilets and absence of animal sheds. Acknowledging these are issues that need to be addressed enables Jelki Bai to become more determined in solving them. According to her, "it is important for the community because, if there is no awareness, there are no benefits, and if there are no benefits then there is no development."

I have found myself repeating the last part of her statement in my mind over and over - “If there are no benefits then there is no development.” It is a curious way to understand development, but a rather acute observation at a very fundamental level. In conventional development paradigms with regards to social change and social justice, seeing and measuring benefits is key to achieving success. It’s rather obvious in some sense, but at the same time poses a much deeper question of what people consider beneficial and how we measure advances in development. Almost all of the individuals I met along this journey said that being self-less and working for others was the best way to improve their community while also improving oneself. In some sense this hints at the notion that what is beneficial is merely what the community desires overall. However, even that statement feels questionable. For what happens when a community believes something is benefiting it when, in fact, it might actually be harming it? And how do we know this? These are difficult questions to answer. All we can do is help communities come together and work toward a long-term and sustainable future they desire.

These were questions I inevitably found myself wondering about while on the road. The road is one of the most tangible realities of development. Its pavement, threading across the Indian landscape, make the most remote parts of this country accessible to villagers and city dwellers alike. Viewing the country as an immensely large community, the road is what makes development possible. How we chose to use the road, toward what future we direct that road, is our choice. It is so easy to lose sight of these greater questions when using all effort on merely navigating a small round about. Indeed, we

cannot think of the long term if all our energy is given toward making it through today.

Perhaps this is one way to understand the work that all the leaders I have interviewed are accomplishing: they are offering villagers, and their communities as a whole, the ability to see further and think on longer-term scales by freeing them of the worries and oppressions that drive their day to day actions. For without this freedom, they will inevitably be trapped in cycles that merely perpetuate their present situations. And not until they achieve this freedom can they truly make decisions on what kind of life they want to live.

Reflecting on Jelki Bai's interview, I am most impressed with her confidence. She has a confidence rarely seen in either man or woman. The way she spoke illuminated a strong passionate and confident soul (and I could tell this, even though I couldn't actually understand what she was saying!). What women need in these communities are role models like Jelki Bai. Because confidence empowers the soul to challenge, question, and stand up to adversity. Hesitation and lack of resolve will only bring hindrances along your journey. Jelki Bai found her confidence through development work. Each project she has undertaken strengthened her for the next, just as every roundabout gave me more faith in navigating the next. And it is through these iterations that one can hope to find a greater perspective.





The Value of the Road

It was often in the jeeps and cars I took to the field that I heard stories from Seva Mandir staff expressing their gratitude for newly built roads. I understood how difficult travelling was in these parts. It was not long before I stopped asking how far a place was and started asking how long it takes to get there. You could easily spend half a day travelling a distance that on a well-kept road normally only takes a couple of hours. I would never contest such a statement or belittle their sentiments of gratitude toward the road with some over-romanticized idea of how life should be in the rural areas. Having lived most of my life in two of the largest metropolitan cities in the world, London and New York City, I am quite used to efficiency being a praise-worthy quality, whether it be in man or machine. However, you begin to see that these roads can be tools for positive change just as much as they can be for negative. Understanding how to take advantage of such a road and making it work for your community is by no means an easy task.



Limba Ram



Limba Ram from the village of Krishnapura made the importance of how we use the road most evident to me. It is his use of the actual physical road as support along the intangible road of leadership that makes him a perfect individual to close this book with. Limba Ram is an exceptional leader in many ways and his ability to use the road to his advantage has been a large part of his success. He understood the importance of being able to work with many different types of people and enterprises. He is as confident and comfortable speaking to important government officials, corporate individuals, and NGOs, as he is speaking to members of his own community. He played an integral role in the creation of the Gram Samuh in his village and held the position of acting treasurer within it. His accountability and transparency made him an honest and sincere leader, making him popular amongst his peers. Limba Ram acknowledged that creating unity was one of the most important parts of his work. He said, “Unity is important not just for development, but also for the social atmosphere. When unity of organization exists, development takes place smoothly.

In order to ensure unity in the village one should motivate, guide, and make efforts to bring people together. If a few are left out they will be distrustful in the future.”

Indeed, one of Limba Ram’s unique leadership qualities is how he integrates new ideas from outside his village into his own community. Going on exposure visits to neighbouring villages where he would witness new and novel techniques used as aids in community development, he exhibited an uncanny ability to see something working in other places and apply it to his own community. Furthermore, he wasn’t afraid to use himself as a guinea pig in the initial stages of testing new community projects.

For example, Limba Ram was the first person in his village to install a 2-horsepower pump for irrigation. He came across this idea on an exposure visit in the neighbouring state of Gujarat. The introduction of the 2hp pump to his community led to an increase in the efficiency of irrigation in his village. So much so that now nearly 50 households in his village of Krishnapura use the 2hp pump. Limba Ram also introduced a sprinkler system in the village, which he believes will be a great success. The sprinkler system will allow more land to be irrigated with less water and less labour. It also saves land because having such a system in place means mehdibunds (traditional mud walls built to keep the water in) are not required. With fewer walls, there is not only more surface area but also more contiguous space within which to plant crops.

Perhaps part and parcel with being able to introduce new and effective community development projects from different places is his ability to communicate with a diverse

group of individuals. Convincing the farmers that the new irrigation system was going to be a good idea was not difficult for Limba Ram. Getting them to trust the bank in order to purchase the system, however, was. Using his innate communication skills, Limba Ram organized a meeting with the farmers and the bank manager and was able to discuss the concerns of the farmers. Once their doubts were allayed, a fair loan was secured and the sprinkler system was put in place.

The value of the road, its worth and what it does or does not do will remain a matter of opinion and perspective. Its inherent value to those who construct it and those who use it may span a vast and contradicting array of characteristics and possibilities. Perhaps the significance and implications of it can only be known in hindsight. Limba Ram makes me consider these ideas through his work for the Hindustan Zinc Limited Company, a mining company that operates within his community. Like many villagers in the area, Krishnapura residents are dependent on this local company for employment.

Limba Ram tells me that the mine is good for his community. It provides employment and was ultimately responsible for his education. Shortly after saying this, however, he points to the hills in the distance and jokes about how no one walks on those parts because they are afraid the ground might cave in. He went on to say how the Forest Department is planting in an area where they have mined directly beneath. Limba Ram, no longer smiling, worries that the forest might collapse one day. The expression on his face made me wonder if these mines really are a good or a bad presence in these communities. There are obviously good and bad aspects to the

mine, and just as the physical road brought Limba Ram's village the 2hp pump, the sprinkler system and even Seva Mandir, it also brought this mining company.

This desire to pin down exactly what the road does will always be tempting; even though its constantly shifting nature might be one of its most prominent characteristics. I believe that our desire to pin down exactly what makes a leader a leader will be an ongoing quest for many generations to come. However, I would say that the question "What makes a leader a leader?" is only part of the greater inquiry at hand. It is not that I am attempting to understand leadership at an objective level, but rather that I am interested in instances when leadership acts as a positive and inspiring force. In this sense, it might be argued that a more important question is, "How do we nurture good people to become good leaders?"

The human race has seen a plethora of notable instances of leadership, both frightfully destructive and incredibly positive. It seems fundamental that we pull apart why someone is a good leader from what that leader does. That is why we must first separate the person from the acts and the acts from the qualities of that leader. In this sense, whether a leader is good or not will largely depend on the culture or community's concept of what makes a good person. Perhaps just like a road, which finds its worth in how it is used, the qualities of an effective leader also find their worth in how they are put to use. How do we reconcile, for example, two completely opposite individuals such as Gandhi and Hitler as great leaders? They were both extremely powerful leaders, yet

the choices they made and the actions they took are what defined them as individuals.

It might be that natural leaders will emerge like natural roads in nature, such as riverways, valleys or underground caves. At the same time, with the right support and effort, every person can also consciously nurture the leader inside themselves. Cultivating leadership skills within ourselves, however, is only as meaningful as what we decide to do with those skills.

Just as I constantly found myself wondering what impact the roads that connect these once isolated communities will have as they now face the uncertainty of progress, I too question how and from where the nurturing of good leaders will come. Seva Mandir, in my opinion, is a great organization that, as long as it remains on its course, will continue to produce great leaders. However, Seva Mandir is only one fish in a very large sea. It's not just the farmer who has given up or lost his agricultural land as a direct result of the building of the road. It's the communities that sit behind the hills, just far enough to be out of sight, but close enough to be in reach, that I consider. Has anyone spoken to them about this? What does it mean to a farmer in Kotra that he is now a stone's throw away from a roaring wave of concrete that can take him all the way to Calcutta? I think to myself of what sort of opportunities this road may bring, while at the same time wondering what dangers will come with it.

I don't think it's just a road. I don't think it just leads people from one place to another. It has far greater implications for the lives of the people it affects than just convenience. It

seems it can be as liberating as much as restricting, a gift as much as a curse. We may never know exactly what leadership is. However, perhaps what Seva Mandir has begun to show us is the importance of making free and meaningful choices in how we live and act. Those in this book have said they'd rather not be spectators to an uncertain future, but rather active agents in making the future what they want. These leaders stand as a source of inspiration and insight not just for their communities but also for people all over this world. They remind us that anybody can be a leader.

On that note, I would like to end with a short story that has touched me deeply along this journey. One day when I was working at the blind school in Udaipur, I noticed a student from the deaf school (where I also volunteered) who came across the street to interact with his fellow peers. I saw that he had grabbed a blind student by the hand and was helping him around. It was a curious sight to me at first because the blind student was talking to the deaf student while the deaf student seemed to be 'showing' him around the place. It fascinated me to watch, and I thought to myself, what a perfect partnership, what a perfect friendship. I still see them holding hands walking down the thin corridor. Their silhouettes have been burned in my mind. I can think of no greater expression of leadership.

This is analogous to the type of leadership that Seva Mandir provides: they lift people when needed, nurture their natural talents, and, ultimately, help them find the capacity to exceed their own expectations.



Glossary of Hindi words

- **Block:** *A Block is a revenue unit of administration. A block has several Panchayats and Urban settlements.*
- **Dacoits:** *Bandits*
- **Gram Samuh:** *Village organised group*
- **Khaat:** *Traditional bed*
- **Matka :** *A clay waterpot to store drinking water.*
- **Namaste:** *Indian way of greeting*
- **NOC:** *No Objection Certificate*
- **Panchayat:** *The smallest unit of governance based on population. Normally encompasses 8 – 10 people and 3 – 4 revenue villages*
- **Patwari:** *Local revenue department official*
- **Samuh:** *A group*
- **Sarpanch :** *Elected leader of a local self-governance body in the village of a Panchayat*
- **Tehsil:** *Second level of local administration in the 3-tier local administration system in India*

“Gandhiji observed in Hind Swaraj ‘Those we speak for we know not, nor do they know us’. This ‘know not’ gap between the professionals and the people they work for is a well-recognized but seldom bridged problem in social effort. Yet, once in a while young persons with passion for finding and facing the truth, their own and of those they are concerned about, plunge deep into the ocean of reality with all its turbulence, agony and ecstasy, and come up with rare pearls of wisdom. Silver Fodder, Firouz Ardalan’s first person narrative of his conversations with local community leaders in South Rajasthan, is a testimony to such an adventure of spirit.”

Kishore Chand Saint

Kishore C Saint is a development worker based in Udaipur. He has more than 35 years of experience in the voluntary sector and is a follower of Gandhian philosophy.

"Silver Fodder" reminds us of the importance of taking civil initiative and of having relentless hope in one's community. A crash course on rural India, this book is the perfect starting place for anyone hoping to educate themselves on the infrastructures and livelihoods of impoverished communities. Through insightful observations of Rajasthan's leaders interspersed with his own story of learning how to drive in India, Fizzy takes us on a journey that, like his experience behind the wheel, is ridden with obstacles but all the more inspiring as a result."

Rachel Kauder Nalebuff

Rachel K. Nalebuff is a graduate student at Yale, studying Arts. She has written a book called “My Little Red Book” and has volunteered with Seva Mandir.

About the Author



Firouz Ardalan

***Firouz Ardalan** (Fizzy) was born in Washington DC in 1984 to parents of Iranian origin. He was raised in England, and studied in Florence and New York where he graduated from New York University with a degree in Philosophy in 2007.*

*His passion for travel and helping others led him to Seva Mandir in 2009 where he worked for one and a half years. Fizzy also wrote and produced **A Lion and a Whale Can Dance**, June 2012, an interactive children's book available on iTunes. Currently he lives and works in New York. In his spare time, he plays guitar and composes music.*

Seva Mandir operates in the Southern part of Rajasthan. Our work area encompasses 626 villages and 56 urban settlements, the majority of which are located in Udaipur district. In total, the organization reaches out to 70,000 houses holds, influencing the lives of approximately 360,000 persons.

Seva Mandir works in the areas of Natural Resource Development, Education, Health, Women's Empowerment and Village Communities Institution Building. The charity's mission is to make real the idea of a society consisting of free and equal citizens who are able to come together and solve the problems that affect them in their particular contexts.

The commitment is to work for a paradigm of development and governance that is democratic and polyarchic. Seva Mandir seeks to institutionalize the idea that development and governance is not only to be left to the State and its formal bodies such as the legislature and the bureaucracy, but that citizens and their association should also engage separately and jointly with state.

Donations of any amount will be gratefully received at the address below.

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