



THE WASTE LAND

Making of grass-roots leaders

NANDITA ROY

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Nandita Roy



National Foundation for India
New Delhi



Seva Mandir
Udaipur

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Seva Mandir
Old Fatehpura
Udaipur



*Dedicated to the memory of
Shri Umed Mal Lodha*

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Foreword

Seva Mandir is an NGO based in Udaipur. Although the idea for it was conceived in the 1920s, the organization itself became operational in 1969.

Through the decade of the 1970s, Seva Mandir concentrated its work on promoting adult education. The efforts of Seva Mandir to promote education, awareness, and development in remote villages were greatly appreciated by the local people. Such was the goodwill and enthusiasm for its work and ideas that Seva Mandir felt emboldened in the early 1980s to organize villagers into groups and encourage them to actively claim development and social services from the state. Seva Mandir's strategy had mixed results. While in some instances the state system could respond to their demands, in most cases the state could not respond meaningfully because it was not clear to either the local people, or to Seva Mandir, or the state officials on how best to tackle the malaise of widespread poverty, disempowerment, and lack of professional attention to work by public servants and NGO workers.

In 1985, the government of India issued a call to NGO's to help create a people's movement to reverse the environmental help crises facing the country. The work area of Seva Mandir comprised vast tracts of once forested but now extensively degraded lands. Seva Mandir's work was mostly among poor peasants living in these hilly tracts who were dependent on natural resources for their livelihood. It decided to participate in the programme of wasteland development even as it meant diverting attention away from 'claim making' on the state.

Within a couple of years, the wasteland development programme of Seva Mandir became its largest programme. However, initially there was resistance to this development. Many members of the staff felt that development work was the responsibility of the state and that it was not for civil society groups to bear this burden. They felt that undertaking large-scale development work would dilute Seva Mandir's commitment to strengthening the ability of village people to hold the state accountable for its perceived responsibilities. These criticisms were all too valid. In the initial years of doing wasteland development work, a great deal of effort went into hiring professionals and training village people and staff to supervise afforestation work, building water-storing structures, and undertaking systematic land improvement. The work of 'claim making' became subordinated to the task of building the capacity of the people and that of Seva Mandir to undertake constructive work itself.

This shift from 'claim making' to actually performing tasks and being accountable to the programme goals was a challenge. For people trained in community mobilization work and awareness generation, the idea of their having to gain professional training and competence was daunting. The large and systematic enrolment of civil engineers, management graduates, and foresters into Seva Mandir was threatening to them. The hiring of professionals made them feel that their skills, talents, and contribution to development work were now being devalued. It took staff members some time to appreciate the fact that professionalism is not merely about formal training, but is also about our attitude to our work and to come to the realization that they all had the potential to achieve the status of professionals. The opportunity to become professionals, irrespective of the educational and social backgrounds of the individual, is one of the most important experiments presently underway in Seva Mandir. After almost two decades, it can be said that many among the staff have gained the self-confidence to become professionals in their work ethos and individual areas of competence. However, for

others the nostalgia for the days of 'claim making' has not diminished with age, and nor has their resentment at having to share space with professionals lessened over time.

At the village level, the opportunities to rehabilitate their degraded lands through their own efforts posed a different set of challenges to the local residents. People appreciated the support made available to them in their efforts to afforest their private lands, and they also appreciated Seva Mandir's strategy to select and train village workers to supervise and coordinate the wasteland development programme. The modest stipends paid to village workers were appreciated, but even greater was the sense of self-esteem generated from having authority and bearing responsibility. These village professionals were known as *vanpals* and *van sahayaks*. At the time the programme started, the *vanpals* were paid Rs. 100 per month and the *van sahayaks* received Rs. 300 per month. Within a period of two years, from 1985 to 1987, Seva Mandir had expanded its wasteland development programme to include around 200 villages spread over five blocks to Udaipur district. In 1987, 5000 peasant families had been motivated to plant two million saplings.

However, to Seva Mandir's chagrin, a people's movement for re-greening the country did not materialize as they had envisioned. It slowly became clear to Seva Mandir that while the peasants were happy to plant trees on their private lands, their stake in cooperating among themselves to regenerate the commons was attenuated. Typically, the commons—comprising forest lands under the custody of the forest department, pasture lands under the custody of village panchayats, and revenue lands under the care of revenue department—had mostly been privatized and encroached upon. The government functionaries and elected village heads had accommodated to the need of peasants to acquire lands in arbitrary and ad hoc ways. Both poor and better-off peasants were accommodated on public lands. It was perhaps nobody's intention to institutionalize widespread corruption and disempowerment, or dilute tribal solidarity, or undermine the efficacy of the villagers' community institutions, and yet the process of acquiescing to

informal, ad hoc, and illegal access achieved precisely these outcomes. This informal privatization of land also resulted in something like 80 per cent of the common lands, which were near human habitation, no longer being available for development as the commons. Considering that 70 per cent of the land mass in this region is vested in public bodies, the lack of clear tenure to these resources is a disincentive to sustainable land use.

Somewhat ironically, just as Seva Mandir was beginning to understand the complexities of engendering collective action for sustainable land use, the policies of the state were being recast on the presumption that community institutions were well preserved and provided an effective locus for sustainable land management.

In 1991, the idea of Joint Forest Management was introduced, permitting village people in principle an opportunity to rehabilitate degraded forest lands while at the same time allowing them a share in the benefits resulting from these joint efforts. In 1994, the National Watershed Guidelines were issued that not only provided large financial resources for watershed development but also privileged local community institutions to manage such programmes.

Seva Mandir found itself on the horns of a dilemma. The privileging of voluntary organizations was based on the assumption of their ability to engender people's participation and to bring about collective action for sustainable land use, and yet on the ground there was little resonance among the people to this idea. To admit failure was also to deny the *raison d'être* of voluntary action as an instrument for development action. Seva Mandir has hoisted on its own petard.

Seva Mandir realized that the problem lay not with the people but rather with the underlying social and property arrangements. The government by permitting informal and illegal access to land had institutionalized patron-client relations vis-à-vis government functionaries and elected leaders, on the one hand, and encouraged factionalism and unregulated competition for resources amongst poor peasants,

on the other. This impasse could only be broken if property relations could be cleaned up and the people made aware of the benefits of freeing themselves from the ties of dependency engendered by the encroachments and other patronage-centred access to resources.

By the mid 1990s, it was clear to Seva Mandir that the issue of property relations had to be addressed. Without this, people would not be able to gain autonomy and agency to build solidarity for collective action. The existing technically sound watersheds and forestry sites on common lands became demonstration sites for local people to imagine the productivity gains from their efforts to alter their social and property relations. Creating these conditions requires the highest level of leadership given that it means persuading people to give up lands that they had effectively privatized. Over the last ten years, village people have come to appreciate the value of this perspective. The Van Uthan Sangh, a federation of over 40 forest protection committees, is in fact spearheading the movement for altering property relations in the villages. They have come to value freedom from patronage and to understand the importance of gaining individual and collective agency for bettering their lives.

The stories of the lives, achievements, and leadership styles of the individual villagers who have done exemplary work in their local areas provide a glimpse into the vitality and vision that have come to inform the people in the forefront of Seva Mandir's attempts to prepare the social and political conditions for truly participatory and emancipatory development work. The consequences of success in this endeavor go well beyond the immediate issue of improved land productivity. Indeed, they go to the very heart of the need to create a society where poor people, professionals, and public servants can participate on an equal footing in shaping the future of their society.

This success also creates the conditions for undertaking further constructive work as well as permitting organizations to be political and do development work at the same time.

Should these trends gather momentum in the years to come, much of the credit would go to the remarkable people profiled by Nandita Roy in this volume.

Neelima Khetan
Chief Executive
Seva Mandir
Udaipur

Preface

Part 1 – The Burial of the Dead

...

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning, striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

'The Waste Land'

T. S. Eliot

I travelled across remote and far-flung areas of Udaipur between October 2002 and March 2003 to interact with grass-roots leaders of this region, profiling their leadership styles, their lives, and their impact on the local communities. The dry and barren landscape in the outback of Rajasthan, bereft of forest cover, evoked an image of bleakness in my mind, reminding me of Eliot's celebrated poem 'The Waste Land'. The millennia-old Aravali range that for long had

dominated the topography in these parts of Rajasthan's once densely forested region is now reduced to rocky outcrops and bare hills. Most of this environmental degradation is the result of man's onslaught on nature, and speaks of a spiritual impoverishment on the part of those who held the trusteeship for the development and welfare of people dependent on these resources for their lives and livelihood. Amidst this stony rubbish, as Eliot would say, where the tree gives no shelter and the dry stone no sound of water, where fear is provoked in a handful of dust, it was here that I discovered a miracle: men and women who have reawakened to a new awareness, determined to change their surroundings, and with it their lives.

I embarked on my journey of discovery and learning in 2002 when Seva Mandir asked the National Foundation for India to profile village-level leaders who have done exemplary community work at the grass-roots level. I felt truly privileged when the NFI Executive Director, Mr Ajay Mehta, asked me to take up the challenge. Having worked as a print media journalist until not so long ago, the reporter in me got all charged up. Subsequently, as I visited the homes of community leaders, spoke to their families, and interacted with members of the village community, I was overwhelmed by the desire to narrate the accounts of their remarkable achievements to the wider world. Covering each community leader from remote corners of Seva Mandir's work area spanning the districts of Udaipur and Rajsamand has been a fascinating experience.

I learned how Seva Mandir had managed to create opportunities for the local peasants to exercise leadership over a 30-year period of development work in the area. It not only helped me gain a lot of experience and understanding about the complexities of development work and the struggles of people working at the grass-roots level, but it has also opened my eyes to the vitality of the people amidst their daily struggle to survive.

Midway through my efforts, I was introduced to the works of Marty Linsky and Ronald A. Heifetz. I found that their

theories on leadership had a deep resonance among and relevance for the activities undertaken by men and women in successfully altering the debilitating patron-client relationship that pervades their community and resisting the widespread abuse of power in our society.¹

The initiatives undertaken by ordinary people like Himmat Shrimali, Jalum Chand, and Shivrul-largely unknown outside their own communities-find resonance in what Linsky and Heifetz write in their book, that a person can exercise leadership even without a position of authority by helping his or her community face hard realities. These people have indeed helped their communities face grave dangers and challenges and make hard choices even at great personal risks. The strength of their leadership lies in their ability to comprehend the significance of a situation beyond the immediate. For them, afforestation work is not merely about planting trees, but is also about forging new identities, establishing new values, strengthening social relations, and looking to the security and well being of the future generations. They are able to go beyond the immediate need for a technical fix to the issue of better land rehabilitation and invest in social processes that not only empower them but also help the functionaries of the state to take seriously the idea of managing public resources for the common good. Specifically, they have done a lot to persuade village people to eschew encroachments on common lands and instead to gain access to these lands legally.

Their ability to work despite differences, to channel their passions into useful directions, and to resolve conflicts through peaceful means is indeed remarkable.

To me, personally, the notion of 'leading with an open heart' (as described in *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the*

¹ My ideas on leadership have been greatly influenced by the works of Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky. See Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Delhi: Universal Book Traders, India, Indian rpt, 1998 and Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

Dangers of Leading, [Part III, Ch. 11, p. 228] by Linsky and Heifetz), that is by being receptive to the full range of human emotions, is very appealing. All the community leaders profiled here seem to have this wonderful capacity to empathize with the problems of others, a leadership trait which was clearly evident in most of my encounters with them, reminding me of Gandhi who had once said: 'That line of action is alone justice which does not harm either party to a dispute.'



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I have many people to thank for helping me with this work. First of all, I'm grateful to my boss Ajay Mehta, executive director, NFI for assigning this task (or should I call it an adventure) to me and thus placing a certain confidence in my ability to get the job done. This book would not have been possible without his constant encouragement and intellectual assistance. His support extended to all departments of my work, from helping me gain a perspective on development work, suggesting people with whom I should talk, and, above all, for generously going through the manuscript several times and giving his valuable suggestions and advice on its content and language. I would also like to thank him for helping me find a title for the book.

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Shankar Ramaswami, a research scholar in Anthropology at the University of Chicago who is currently conducting his fieldwork in Delhi on the lives of migrant labourers, also read the manuscript. I am grateful for his encouragement and useful feedback on the draft. Prakash Kashwan, a former Seva Mandir employee, also contributed by sharing his experience of working with the NGO.

Many people helped in compiling information on specific regions and individual profiles. Madhav Taylor, block coordinator of Jhadol block, narrated exciting stories and described his experiences while working in Nayakheda. He shared his assessment of people like Shivilal, Pannanlal, and Prem Singh of Nayakheda. Mamta Vardhan of NRD provided a valuable and insightful perspective on the Van Uthan Sangh. Vimal Jain, block coordinator of Kherwada block, provided information for the profile on the Karmala group, and Narayan Ameta did the same for the Selu committee.

Uday Mehta, professor of political philosophy at Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA, also took the trouble of reading the manuscript. I am grateful to him for helping me with interpreting T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land'.

I owe a special thanks to Jagat Mehta for his great help and warm hospitality during all my trips to Udaipur. Not only did I enjoy the comforts of his home during my stay in the city, but I was also privileged to absorb his thoughts and views on a variety of issues, ranging from foreign policy and development to leadership.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. The photographs shot by the lively and ever cheerful Nihal Mathur capture the soul of the individuals profiled in this book and help to animate the words on the page. He travelled

extensively to capture these grass-roots leaders in action. I thank him for the cover picture as well.

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Nandita Roy
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New Delhi.

Goodness Par Excellence

Umed Mal Lodha

Umed Mal Lodha, an agriculturist by profession, worked with the Rajasthan government and retired as joint director, agriculture. Respected as an honest and upright officer, he was passionate about his job. Following his retirement, he worked with the Birla Group and then joined Seva Mandir in 1985. It was in Seva Mandir that Umed Mal acquired a stature and prominence that went beyond just being a good professional. He was able to mentor younger colleagues and provide leadership within Seva Mandir, imparting new vigour and vitality to the natural resources programme of the organization.

His contribution to the development of the natural resources programme of Seva Mandir was not just technical in nature. Umed Mal was deeply committed to the idea of serving society. He was loathe to see any wastage of public resources and nothing gave him more pleasure than to see young people work hard and deliver results. 'Not only did he encourage young professionals at Seva Mandir to take up challenges, but what was truly rare was the kind of space and support he then provided to them,' says Neelima Khetan, chief executive of Seva Mandir. Well before he was due to retire he actively canvassed for the induction of S.N Bhise, who eventually became his successor.

Umed Mal's initiation into the work culture of Seva Mandir may well have begun during his school days itself. He studied at Vidya Bhavan in Udaipur, which was founded by Mohan

Singh Mehta who was also the founder of Seva Mandir.¹

Within the organization, people also remember Umed Mal as a storehouse of knowledge, not just on agriculture but also on various other subjects, especially world history. 'He had a very sharp memory and could talk at length on various subjects,' adds Neelima.

Umed Mal strongly believed in the philosophy of simple living and high thinking. Says his wife Sayar Kanwar Lodha: 'Umed Malji did not believe in acquiring material wealth. So we had a tough life and my children struggled a lot. But because he stood by his moral values and principles, today even after his death, he commands respect that the family is proud of. I'm happy for the kind of respect he is getting because, after all, he was never a very high-ranking official.'

Now the proud son of his father, Satish Lodha, however, reminisces about the days when these very traits in Umed Mal, which are now considered virtues, were a sore point with him. He relates a story: 'I had bought a plot of land worth Rs 50,000, but I was falling short by Rs. 10,000. I requested my father for a loan and promised to pay him back with interest. My father's reply is still etched in my memory. He said: "You might be expecting a draft of Rs. 10,000 as asked by you. But I regret to inform you that it will not be possible for me to spare any such amount to you. Whatever money I have with me has been given by the government in lieu of services rendered to them. I have kept this money for my old age and to fulfill my liabilities (marriage of your sister Babli). If you want to purchase a plot beyond your capacity, you have to generate your own additional resources or squeeze your needs to the size suited to your pocket. I'm sorry I've disappointed you." These words really broke my heart and

¹ Vidya Bhavan in Udaipur, Rajasthan was set up in 1931. It is one of the pioneer co-educational institutions, with the philosophy of treating every child as a unique individual and molding the students into good citizens with sound moral character and a deep sense of social responsibility.

I felt very bad. But today I realize the significance of that act. He helped us develop a sense of respect and dignity both within ourselves as well as for others.'

Umed Mal worked in Seva Mandir for ten years. He was 74 when he retired from the organization, on 31 December 1998. He died about six weeks later, on the Seva Mandir premises, on 12 February 1999.

Following his death, Umed Mal's family and close colleagues under the guidance of S.N. Bhise decided to create a trust known as the Umed Mal Lodha Memorial Society in his memory to acknowledge and recognize the contribution of grass-roots leaders engaged in natural resource development work. 'It was to honor a man who in his life sought no recognition and never felt aggrieved by its absence,' Neelima says. And thus the U.M. Lodha Award was instituted in the year 2000.

Part 1

Individuals Who Made a
Difference

Resistance and Reconstruction

Shivlal, Pannalal Rebari and Prem Singh



(L to R) Shivlal, Pannalal Rebari, and Prem Singh

Almost two decades ago, in Nayakheda, a cluster of seven hamlets located 40 km. from Udaipur, three spirited young men came together in a unique partnership to redefine the centuries-old caste equations of the region in their quest for a better life. In the process, their path-breaking endeavour not only helped rewrite the social history of the Nayakheda cluster, otherwise steeped in deep caste distinctions, but it also helped free the residents from the clutches of the local tyrant. Here is the story of the three friends and what their teamwork was able to achieve for the village: Shivlal, a tribal, Prem Singh, a Rajput, and Pannalal Rebari from the Rebari community.

Our story begins with Shivilal, who grew up in extremely difficult circumstances in a poor *adivasi* family. 'We had a very harsh childhood. Most of the time, our family was deprived of money. So we lived on loans and charity. Buying a pen or a pencil was a tough choice. But somehow I managed to study till the 8th standard. Then my parents refused to support my education any longer. They wanted me to lend a hand by finding myself a job,' reminisces Shivilal, now in his 40s.

Shivilal went from place to place in search of a job. He knocked on the door of Bhanwar Singh, the owner of a local soapstone mine. Bhanwar Singh is a tall, well-built man with a long, flowing moustache curled upwards in typical Rajput style. He wielded enormous power and authority in Nayakheda because of his upper caste credentials, economic standing, and political connections. Shivilal joined the mine as a labourer, but soon regretted having taken up the job because the miners faced a perpetual fear of death. 'We had to work very deep below the ground. I was always scared of dying from a stone falling on my head,' he says. Also, the wages were a pittance and payment depended largely on the whims and fancies of the owner. But this was hardly a point of debate as most labourers were very poor and in desperate need of employment.

Two years later Shivilal decided to quit and tried his hand at construction work instead. Around this time, in the late 1970s, Shivilal chanced upon a Seva Mandir worker, Logarlal, who introduced him to Seva Mandir's adult education programme. He immediately sensed a great opportunity and asked Logarlal to tell him more about the programme. Soon Seva Mandir invited Shivilal to attend a training workshop for the supervisors of its adult education programme in Udaipur. With this step, Shivilal's destiny began to change.* 'After attending the ten-day workshop, I was asked to survey the number of adults in my village. I drew up a list of all the adults in the 14 to 35 age group. Soon I started a *kendra* in Nayakheda, beginning with 26 people. I taught for two hours at night and was paid Rs. 50 a month. However, I continued to work as a construction worker during the day,' Shivilal recollects. That

single opportunity paved the way for Shivlal to undertake many other community initiatives in the future. But the going wasn't easy for him. Shivlal's family lived on the margins of Nayakheda's society, and he was known only among his own tribal Gameti community. Gaining social acceptance and assuming a position of community leadership in the village was an altogether different ball game.

However, this role in public affairs is seemingly the natural preserve of Pannalal Rebari, a Seva Mandir *swastha sahayak*. He belongs to a family of leaders and is highly respected in all the hamlets of the Nayakheda cluster. Pannalal is a born leader, very charismatic and intelligent, who seems to know the ways of the world. In contrast, Shivlal comes across as diligent, sincere, and hardworking. In fact, both men seem to be two sides of the same coin. A former Seva Mandir staffer puts it aptly: 'Pannalal is a consummate politician who kept Shivlal alive.' The third member of the team is Prem Singh. Although a reluctant leader and a man of few words, he is known to be a great worker with bundles of energy. Even though Prem Singh, a Rajput, occupies a much higher position in the local caste hierarchy than Shivlal, an *adivasi*, he would more often than not backstop for Shivlal and Pannalal, who were mainly involved in the larger issues of the village and who did not have time for the nitty-gritty details of development work.

Inspired by his stint with Seva Mandir Shivlal now aspired for more. He longed to be a *van sahayak* but was rejected for the post. Unhappy, Shivlal switched loyalties to join another NGO. 'From 1988 to 1990, I worked with another NGO, but began to dislike the work because they did not treat people with dignity.' So he remained without a job for six months. That was when Prem Singh and Pannalal came to his rescue. 'They helped me get back my job with Seva Mandir where I joined as *van pal*,' he says.

Prem Singh, Pannalal, and Shivlal were not thick friends although their families were known to each other. Although their fathers were well acquainted, they never really bonded enough to pass on their friendship to the next generation,

which had in fact grown apart. The highly caste-conscious society of Nayakheda also did not permit social inter-mingling between different castes and communities from the hamlets. But a quirk of fate brought the three families together.

'Seva Mandir encouraged us to sit together and discuss our common problems. That's how ten of us got together and formed a village committee. Panji, Premji, and myself were part of this committee, where all the ten members had some exposure to Seva Mandir work. The committee slowly grew to 26 members,' says Shivalal.

'We also realized the potential of these three leaders and their ability to play a leadership role. We encouraged their friendship. At every meeting, whether in Kaya (where the Seva Mandir training centre is located) or in the village, we tried to help them shed their caste hang-ups. In the early days, Prem Singh would always make an excuse and leave Shivalal's house whenever tea or food was served,' says Madhav Taylor, Jhadol block coordinator, with a smile. Madhav was posted in Nayakheda at that time as the local field worker.

Gradually, the committee adopted a few initiatives. A link road was constructed, a *balwadi* centre was opened, money to improve agricultural land was made available, a nursery was developed, and trees planted. Efforts were also made to include all the seven hamlets of Nayakheda within the scope of these initiatives. 'We started plantations on the lands of individual farmers, cutting across *phalas* and castes,' says Shivalal. This helped Shivalal touch the lives of many more people across communities, castes, and creeds. 'I got an opportunity to interact with a lot of people from this village irrespective of their caste or community. I initiated meetings with them as well,' he says enthusiastically. All the *phalas* also came together to develop the common pasture land. The villagers treated the land and then planted trees and shrubs on it.

However, despite creating the necessary capacities among the people and helping them with development work, Seva Mandir made little progress with its development initiatives in the village. Bhanwar Singh, through an unholy nexus with government officials, elected village council representatives,

and political leaders, prevented the poor villagers from joining hands to initiate development work. In fact, Bhanwar Singh had even encroached on a substantial portion of the village pasture for mining purposes in connivance with the local revenue officials and the police.

A bizarre incident took place in 1990. Bhanwar Singh and his two sons were charged with the murder of 11 members of an equally powerful family in a neighbouring village. All the three accused were put behind bars for the next four years. It was during this period that the locals mustered enough courage to organize themselves into undertaking development work. With this one act began a flurry of activities that were to change the face of Nayakheda. The community got together and was able to take back the land encroached on by Bhanwar Singh. This opened up the prospect of treating the entire watershed of the area. The construction of check dams and boundary walls was taken up first. The watershed work was completed in three years' time. The unity among the villagers was evident both in their work as well as in the functioning of the village institutions. All the seven *phalas* created a single *gram kosh* and set up one committee. Despite Bhanwar Singh's absence, it was still a struggle. During the period of the watershed construction, the villagers needed a compressor for blasting work before they could start digging wells. The villagers decided to approach Bhanwar Singh's wife Chanda Bai with a request for the compressor.

Chanda Bai flew into a rage. 'When my husband was going to jail, there was a murder case against him, people from the neighbouring village were attacking us, even the government turned against us. Where were you all at that time? You people did not come to help us and now you want my help,' she thundered. 'We did not retort, but hired a compressor from a neighbouring village,' recounts Shivlal, revealing a calm and composed demeanour. 'Having got the job done without any help from Bhanwar Singh's family was obviously a huge challenge to their authority. Chanda Bai's son threatened the person with dire consequences if he dared to help us again,' says Shivlal.

'One day, after a usual day's work, at least 15 of us had gone to drop the tractor owner to his house,' recalls Shivalal. However, just after they had departed, Chanda Bai came to the site of the blasting with one of her sons. She was heavily armed with a *gupti*, a revolver, and a *talwar*, and ordered the labourers to stop work immediately. 'Who has given you the permission to do this work? Till Thakur Bhanwar Singh comes back from jail nobody is going to do any development work here,' she ordered. 'We were on our way back home and had decided to sit in Pannalal's house for a while to have tea. At that time a person working at the site came running to us. Shaking with fear, he narrated the story. We immediately rushed to the site. We spoke to Chanda Bai and asked her what the matter was. She repeated her threats and said that there would be no development work in the village till Bhanwar Singh returned or else she would kill anyone challenging her orders. At that point we decided to act with prudence and not challenge her since she was heavily armed,' Shivalal says. He continues: 'In fact, we tried to pacify her and even agreed to discontinue work. We managed to calm her down and send her away.' Indeed, it is worth noting that the village leaders were able to take pragmatic decisions rather than adopting an adversarial stance, revealing a very vital facet of their leadership style.

But the incident also set the villagers thinking on the next course of action. After discussing the matter with Seva Mandir, the villagers decided to take their first major step against Bhanwar Singh's family and registered a complaint with the police of harassment by Chanda Bai. 'We wrote our complaint letter. Around 20 of us also went and met the collector,' Shivalal says. However, Pannalal bitterly recalls how the local police were always hand in glove with the thakur's family because of their 'money power and ability to buy out people'.

Their strategy worked and Chanda Bai was quiet for the next six months. But soon enough, she went back to her old ways. This time she began enclosing some of the roads. 'There was a *nallah* from which the cattle drank water. She decided to enclose it. There was a water reservoir. She blasted and broke that down as well,' Shivalal says.

But the villagers were not ready to relent either. They once again decided to take legal recourse and registered yet another complaint with the police. 'When the *thanedar* came, I personally went with him to show him the places that Chanda Bai had occupied illegally. She had blocked roads, destroyed a water reservoir, and erected a boundary wall around a poor *adivasi*'s house so that she could dump the *malba* from the soapstone mine in that place. The *thanedar* decided on the spot to break the illegal boundary wall over the pasture. The villagers then came forward and helped knock it down,' Shivlal recounts. The next day they created their own boundary wall on that land. The police even arrested Chanda Bai and her son. 'What was amusing was that Bhanwar Singh met Chanda Bai in jail and he was quite surprised to see her there,' Pannalal quips with a twinkle in his eyes. However, she was soon released on bail.

The persistent efforts of the villagers, backed by Seva Mandir and supported by the Collector's Office, made it difficult for the police to be openly partisan. This helped break the nexus between the officials and Bhanwar Singh's people, which had thrived on money and muscle power. They could no longer coerce the poor and take them for granted. This shift in the power balance was evident during the *panchayat* elections of 1995. The seat for the *sarpanch* in this area is reserved for a tribal. The village group decided to back Shivlal for the post as an independent candidate against the nominee of Bhawar Singh who was backed by the Congress. Incidentally, four years had passed and Bhanwar Singh was back from jail. He was acquitted of all the charges. Bhanwar Singh was furious to see Shivlal defying his might. "He threatened to have me killed and even said 'I've killed 11 people and it makes little difference if I kill a couple more!'" Shivlal says.

But Bhanwar Singh had a queer personality and could change directions as rapidly as a weathercock. After his release, he started contacting people in the village, profusely apologizing to them for his wife's conduct in his absence. 'She is the daughter of this village and you should forgive her. I can assure you that this will not happen again,' he told them.

Then he called a meeting of the villagers. He requested the people to withdraw the cases against his wife. After a few days, he also called the police to the village. 'He wrote out a letter on our behalf stating that the village people were withdrawing the cases against his wife. We also relented because his behaviour had completely changed and all of us signed or gave our thumb impressions on that letter,' Shivalal narrates. Little did the poor villagers realize that this was just a ploy to get them to take back their charges against Chanda Bai.¹

By the time the *panchayat* elections came, Bhanwar Singh's behaviour took a U-turn again. Unable to get Shivalal out of his way, he tried playing yet another trick on the villagers. The officer-in-charge tried to thwart Shivalal's candidature on procedural grounds. He was asked to prove three things: that he was a resident of that area, that he was not a government employee, and that he did not have debts to pay to the government. Initially, the authorities tried to disqualify him on the grounds of his being associated with Seva Mandir, but when that objection did not work, they asked him to furnish a no-debt certificate. The secretary of the village council who was the government official responsible for giving this certificate stopped attending office after promising to issue the certificate. 'It was the last day for filing the nominations. We decided to find the officer and we traced him to his house in Udaipur. We refused to leave till he gave me the certificate,' Shivalal says, revealing his steely resolve. The desire to win the political battle against Bhanwar Singh was uppermost in the minds of the villagers of the Nayakheda cluster. Shivalal was finally elected by a slender margin of 41 votes, 'even though the people who were present there believe that I had won by more than 500 votes,' Shivalal adds. He also set an example by hardly spending any money on his campaign. 'I only spent around Rs. 7,000 while my rival was reported to have spent Rs. 70,000,' he says.

¹ Chanda Bai belongs to Nayakheda and Bhanwar Singh settled in Nayakheda in his wife's house after marriage.

Shivlal is very clear about what drives him to the leadership position that he holds today. 'People voted for me because I have one thing that goes in my favour, which is I am an honest person. People recognize this quality in me. I have a clean record and till date nobody can point a finger at me. I have also always behaved well with people. Even now when I'm no longer the *sarpanch*, people still recognize and acknowledge the good work done for the village during my tenure,' he says confidently.

During Shivlal's term in office as *sarpanch*, which lasted for five years, Bhanwar Singh was elected as *ward panch*. Once again a period of high drama and tension began. Bhanwar Singh tried his best to oust Shivlal. 'Twice he tried to get a no-confidence motion passed against me. But the others did not agree because there were no grounds. The *up-sarpanch*, a Patel by caste, was also my supporter,' Shivlal says. So he became adamant and did not buckle under pressure.

Then a dispute broke out all over again over the pasture land which Bhanwar Singh had earlier claimed as his own and which the villagers had reclaimed by breaking down the boundary wall. Bhanwar Singh said he would not give up his claim on the land. 'Even in *panchayat* meetings he would only discuss this piece of land. It went on for a very long time. One day we decided to keep the *panchayat* quorum in the village *chauraha*. He threatened us in that meeting and said come what may, he would take that land. Then one night Bhanwar Singh came to my house and said he needed that land to throw *malba* from his mines. I said this was a common pasture and people would not hand it over to him,' Shivlal says. Though bitterly opposed to Bhanwar Singh, Shivlal decided to take a bold step and strike a compromise. He told Bhanwar Singh: 'If this is so, we could leave a little portion of the land for you to dump the *malba*.' Shivlal says, probably reflecting the desires of the villagers.

The next day Shivlal and Pannalal went to the pasture at a designated time. Bhanwar Singh had requested just the two of them to be there. Fearing that this could be yet another ploy by Bhanwar Singh, the villagers were on their guard. 'We were a little scared. We had a meeting that very night and

discussed it with the village people. We decided that only the two of us would go to the site and the rest of the men would be at least half a kilometer away in the field, keeping a close watch just in case we were in trouble,' Shivalal says, barely hiding the excitement in his voice.

The next day Bhanwar Singh, his sons, Pannalal, and Shivalal met at the pasture. The meeting lasted from the morning till five in the evening. 'He once again started his old complaints, repeated them over and over again, and just wouldn't come to a compromise. Then finally he gave in. We decided to give him a portion of the land and demarcated the area then and there,' Pannalal says. Since Shivalal was a *sarpanch* and a leader and so was Pannalal, they were able to take decisions on behalf of the entire village. The next day the villagers came and made a *pucca* boundary wall. They gave away around 5 *bighas* of land out of some 30-35 *bighas*.

It is interesting to note how compromises and fights were constantly taking place almost simultaneously. Bhanwar Singh's ire against the soft-spoken Prem Singh was particularly severe. Incidentally, Prem Singh also happens to be Bhanwar Singh's nephew. 'Bhanwar Singh held the three of us responsible for all his problems and wanted to eliminate us. He knew that we had mobilized the people, created awareness among them, and were the leaders behind the initiatives to bring development work to the village. He obviously felt that we were responsible for provoking the people who were now reluctant to work in his mines. It didn't matter to him that he treated all of them as bonded labourers. Now that the people are aware of their rights, Bhanwar Singh has a problem because people refuse to let themselves be exploited,' Prem Singh says. 'He was a little careful when it came to actually harming me physically because he feared that harming a backward caste could flare up into a caste war. So he chose his Thakur brethren for meting out severe punishment,' Shivalal adds.

Today Bhanwar Singh may have lost the battle that he waged against his fellow villagers but his pride is still intact. 'I am the only Thakur in this village and the rest are all very

poor. I own around 12 mines in this area. All my children are very hardworking and honest,' he says, driving down a dirt track inside his village in one of his several jeeps. His *Thakur* pride does not allow him to express any regret about his actions nor to reveal any animosity towards the new leaders of his village. 'As a *Thakur*, I'm happy that my village is developing. Shivlal and the others are doing a good job. I'm very happy that Seva Mandir is helping these poor people. There are around 5,000 people here from the lower castes. Mine is the only educated family in the whole village. I give dumpers, tractors, and all the help that these poor people require. I too take a lot of interest in development work so that these poor people can get jobs,' he says with profound sincerity, ending every sentence with the '*Hari-Om*' chant, and repeatedly emphasizing his concern for the poor.

Today Shivlal is an *aajivika karyakarta* in Seva Mandir in charge of four *panchayats* and earns Rs. 1,850 a month. While he has 7 *bighas* of land, only 2 *bighas* are worth farming because of the undulating nature of the land in these parts. Shivlal has six children, four girls and two boys. Three of his daughters are married, and the youngest daughter and two sons are in school. 'When my older daughters were growing up, girls hardly went to school. We didn't even have a school in the village, so they missed out on their studies. When I became a *sarpanch* I built a school in the village,' Shivlal explains. Besides working relentlessly for the people of his village, Shivlal also had to grapple with household problems.

Tagti Bai, Shivlal's wife, relates an incident that created turmoil in Shivlal's personal life. 'Earlier we lived in a joint family. My husband's elder brother and his wife would regularly fight with me. I suffered a lot because of their behaviour. But Shivji and also my mother-in-law preferred to remain silent. Shivji was providing food to his mother, but even then she preferred to remain neutral. This continued for almost a year. It was then that I decided to speak up. To show my disrespect, I stopped covering my face in front of my eldest

brother-in-law and even started wearing shoes in front of him. He was taken aback by my guts,' she says.¹

Things came to such a pass that Tagti *Bai* threatened to leave. Even though Shivalal was aware of the problem, he took his own time to take action. 'I knew my elder brother was wrong and was ill-treating my wife. But I did not want to add to the fight. My intervention would have only aggravated the situation. If everybody starts fighting then who will listen and try to find a solution? So I was more patient and tried working out a solution by hearing both sides of the dispute,' he says.

Shivalal did exactly that. He also consulted community members of his tribe. There were two or three meetings. Finally the property was divided, and Shivalal built a new house into which he moved with his wife and children.

Prem Singh, also an *aajivika karyakarta*, is now posted in Delwara, in the Badgoan block. He is in charge of five *panchayats* and earns almost as much as Shivalal, with a salary of Rs. 1,350, in addition to TA and DA. He has two sons and a daughter. However, Prem Singh withdrew his daughter from school after she completed the 5th standard. 'We Rajputs follow the *purdah* system very strictly and do not allow our girls to go out after they attain puberty,' adds Sosar *Bai*, Prem Singh's wife. However, Sosar *Bai*, who addresses her husband as *maharaj*, has one complaint against him. 'While the *adivasis* have already got electricity in their hamlet, power has yet to reach our hamlet. I wish *maharaj* is able to do something,' she says.

Pannalal Rebari is a health worker in Seva Mandir. Since this is a part-time job, Pannalal earns Rs. 800 a month. He has three daughters, all of whom are married, and a son who was born 11 years after the birth of his youngest daughter. His wife Anja *Bai* believes that development work has actually helped the Nayakheda cluster to come out of the clutches of the caste system, which has deep roots in the region. 'Earlier

¹ The wearing of shoes by women in the presence of elders, particularly men, is considered an affront to their dignity.

a Gameti would have to sit on the floor in front of us,' she says, smiling at Shivlal, who at the time was sitting on the family cot. 'But now we maintain no such difference, thanks to all the awareness that was created through development work,' she adds. Though traditionally Pannalal's family have been camel breeders, that business died with the ban on open grazing in the village. 'We had 50 camels which we sold at the Pushkar *mela*,' Anja Bai says. Despite this end to their traditional way of life, the Rebaris comprising about 35-40 families in the Nayakheda area believe they lead a much better life today. 'Even though we too haven't got electricity yet,' she adds.

Meanwhile, village leaders like Shivlal are making every effort to create a base for the emergence of a sustained and able leadership. 'I keep thinking about how to create a stronger base among the people. I may again stand for elections for the post of *sarpanch*, that is, if the people want me,' Shivlal says, not trying to hide his political aspirations.

Taking a leadership role also came naturally to him, it seems. 'This question of why I have come forward to take up other people's responsibilities never arose within me. My motivation is, if I do some good to others, God will do good to me as well,' he says, revealing his desire for spiritual gain. He then grows serious and makes a profound statement: 'A person should leave a mark in this life before he dies. Only then will he be remembered long after he is gone. Like Gandhiji. Even today he lives in our hearts and is known as *Rashtrapita* to us. The U. M. Lodha Award has given me a lot of satisfaction and is probably an incentive for achieving a larger goal in life.'

Pannalal and Prem Singh, who also received the award along with Shivlal, nod in agreement.

Strategizing Development

Jalum Chand



Jalum Chand

Jalum Chand grew up in Shyampura's poorest family. Sitting in his mud-and-dung plastered hut in this south Rajasthan village, Jalum says: 'Here, I belonged to the poorest among the poor. We had to make do with barely one square meal a day. The patch of earth we owned didn't even pass off as farm land. And we could not afford to rear our own cattle.' As a six-year-old child, Jalum grazed the cattle of the prosperous Brahmins and Patels for which they paid him only Rs. 8 a month. 'Those days of poverty are still etched in my memory,' he says. Today, it's a different story, however.

'People to whom I once went for succor walk up to my doorstep now,' boasts Jalum Chand with an air of finality. That's probably the only time that Jalum Chand betrays traces of strong passion and emotion.

Almost 80 km. south-west of Udaipur in Rajasthan, Shyampura is a 100-household village inhabited by scheduled tribes. Once upon a time, life here was harsh. Residents, especially Shyampura's womenfolk, scoured far and wide in search of fuel, fodder, and water, because twenty years ago the village had little else other than barren land bereft of forest cover and water. Today, as they say, all that is history. A patch of green forest has sprung up where there was parched soil before, ensuring a steady supply of fuel wood for the villagers. A reservoir too has come up in the village. Shyampura's residents now use the lift-irrigation system to bring water almost to their doorsteps.

What has made this happen? These developments were made possible by the interventions of Seva Mandir and the efforts of people like Jalum Chand. For nearly two decades now, Jalum Chand has been central to Seva Mandir's voluntary initiatives in Shyampura. As with most others in the village, Jalum's parents reared a large family of five sons and four daughters. Poverty made sure that the children did not go to school, unlike in the case of the upper caste Brahmins and Patels. As Jalum watched the boys and girls from prosperous homes head for school each morning, he was overcome with a burning desire to learn how to read and write. 'I knew that if I studied, I could get a job,' he says. In the early 1970s, opportunity finally knocked at his door when Nathulal, who later became the village *sarpanch*, helped him enroll at the school. That proved to be the beginning of a new journey in Jalum's life.

Early in his life Jalum Chand had learnt the art of being tactful. To keep his teacher in good humour, he would clean the tutor's utensils and lay out his bed. In return, the tutor gave him with some food. Soon Nathulal enlisted Jalum Chand in Seva Mandir's work as well, first, at the non-formal education centre, and then, with the afforestation work. Vast tracts of

land in Shyampurā had been stripped bare of trees as people encroached on the jungle. 'Seva Mandir helped me realize that the trees were our lifeline,' he says. In 1992 there was an opportunity to rehabilitate degraded forest lands under the newly promulgated joint forest management guidelines. Jalum Chand was able to motivate his peers to vacate the encroachments and create conditions for the establishment of the first ever JFM site brokered by an NGO. 'Some people are quick to realize what's good for them, and I'm one of those few,' he says matter-of-factly. But the initial years were tough. The local forest ranger, not used to people complaining, rebuked him for trying to be a *neta*. 'Those days I used to be very nervous. I still remember the first Seva Mandir workshop in our village where I was asked to speak. As I wasn't articulate enough, my voice shivered,' he recollects laughingly now. Jalum Chand also realized that only protecting the forests in his own village was not enough. So he zealously worked with other villages to set up 16 forest protection committees in the entire Bicchiwada zone.

As a forest para-worker for Seva Mandir, Jalum Chand today spearheads most of the development work in his village. But this leadership position within the village hasn't come to him on a platter. Soon after he joined the voluntary effort in 1983, Seva Mandir identified five potential leaders for the village development work: Jalum's one-time benefactor Nathulal Angari, Nanalal, Narain, Ram Lal, and Jalum Chand himself. The problem was that all of them, except Jhalum, sympathized with one political party or the other. So they found it difficult to win over the people's trust. The villagers looked up to Jhalum as a man without a political agenda. He was neutral and bereft of party affiliations. This made him much more acceptable to the villagers. Seva Mandir too nurtured his leadership qualities, placing under his charge the development work in Shyampurā, be it for putting in place a lift-irrigation system or building a small dam popularly known as *anicut* in these parts of Rajasthan, or for protecting the forest.

Despite being younger than the other potential leaders from his village, Jalum also created space for himself within

the community. When Shyampura's twin hamlets, *Vada Phala* and *Kala Phala*, went to war with each other over the sharing of the spoils of development work, Jalum was first accused of harbouring vested interests, but was eventually accepted as a consensus leader.

The residents of *Vada Phala* were piqued that the lift-irrigation facility being set up by Seva Mandir would not help them as much as it would help the folks at *Kala Phala*. So they started boycotting Seva Mandir, and accused Jalum Chand of shifting development work to his own hamlet. Soon their ill feelings turned to direct charges of wrongdoing. Once Jalum was even charged with attempted murder, while on another occasion ruffians were dispatched to his house to get him beaten up. Eventually, the murder charge was dismissed because it could not stand in a court of law, and Jalum too opted out of registering a formal case against those who tried to beat him up so as not to let ill will persist. Today villagers from both the hamlets openly accuse their *sarpanch* Ram Lal of engineering a split between them. Tension between the two hamlets peaked when Ram Lal instigated the residents of *Vada Phala* to build a road cutting through the jungle for which at least 800 trees would have to be axed. Jalum led a group of villagers in protest and physically prevented the road from being constructed. 'At that time, even I felt as if I was losing my strength. But I think the drive and motivation come from the desire to improve our lives. Cutting those trees and building a road would have undone all the effort that went into motivating people to protect their forest,' he says in a reflective mood.

Jalum Chand's ability to stay neutral and unruffled in a crisis also helped to finally resolve differences between the two hamlets. 'We now realize what Jalum Chand did was good because he at least succeeded in keeping Seva Mandir in our village. Our bickering and infighting would have driven Seva Mandir away and there would have been no development. We need the help of an organization for development,' says Motilal of *Vada Phala*, till recently the right-hand man of Ram Lal.

But Ram Lal still carries his bitterness. He accuses Jalum Chand of being partial. 'It was Jalum Chand who started playing favourites. Now there is no more development work happening in Shyampura. So there's no fight between the hamlets,' he says. That's only a half-truth. The residents of Vada *Phala* are now engaged in joint forest management work. And this has helped ease tensions.

Shyampura's residents say Jalum Chand has proved himself a strong leader time and again. He left Seva Mandir briefly in 1994 to work as a supervisor in a government watershed programme. Once there, it was easy to get tempted. The lure of easy money at first proved difficult to resist. But he was quick to realize that this money would be ill-gotten through manipulating the muster rolls. He realized that this would compromise his standing as a leader. He also realized that one day his leadership would definitely grow beyond the village boundaries, both within and outside of Seva Mandir. That possibility appealed to him more than the extra money that he could earn through the watershed programme. Jalum Chand has proved to be a sharp thinker, a long-term player who is able to appreciate the stakes involved in making a success of Seva Mandir's efforts at development.

The ability to give respect and dignity to others has also helped Jalum Chand emerge as a stronger leader. Hemraj Bhatti, general secretary of Seva Mandir, relates an incident to elaborate this point. Once Nathulal made a commitment to hold a tournament through the village fund, known as the *gram vikas kosh*. Nathulal did not bother to explain what purpose such a tournament would serve. Jalum Chand was quick to realize that this would amount to misusing a common fund. He then worked towards an alternative. He asked Shyampura's residents to donate for the tournament. This tactful step not only saved the prestige and self-respect of both Nathulal and the villagers, but also proved Jalum Chand's maturity as a leader.

Standing against the entrance to his thatched hut, where his U. M. Lodha Award which he received in the year 2000 hangs pretty, Jalum Chand, for obvious reasons, is

embarrassed talking about his personal life. He shies away from revealing that he had been married twice, to two sisters. Jalum's first wife bore him three sons. His second wife bore him a daughter, now two years old. All three sons study in an English-medium school.

Though distinctly uncomfortable answering the question, Jalum finally says that marrying twice is very much part of the local culture in south Rajasthan. 'Yes, I married my wife's sister because my father-in-law had no son. But I definitely think it is a bad influence and we should not allow this practice to continue. Maintaining two families is also very tough as I have separate houses for each of them,' he says with a faraway look. In an introspective mood, Jalum also admits that his first wife was disturbed when he told her of his decision to marry her sister. 'She has compromised a lot,' he adds. After a pause, he goes on: 'I stay in both the places. Since my first wife is not at home (she has gone to the fields), I've brought you to my second wife's house.'

When you finally get to meet Jalum Chand's first wife, she appears quiet and withdrawn, remarkably quite unlike the second, who chats and laughs a lot. You ask the first wife if she's resigned to her destiny, having to share her husband with her sister. 'No, why should I?' she says, arguing that there is no difference because Jalum, after all, has married her own sister. Yet her eyes tell a different story. There's a glint of sadness in them when you confront her with this awkward question.

Whether it is family affairs or village politics, life in Shyampura is complex and many layered.

Jalum Chand's parents, Vaktaji and Kamtu Bai, are proud of their son. They stay less than half a kilometer away. His mother had no problems with her son marrying twice. 'A second marriage in our community is socially accepted. Also, there's plenty of work to be shared between the two wives.' That's when the outsider Devli Bai interjects: 'I protested when my son brought another wife because he did not earn enough.'

Despite the social dilemmas that confront him, there is no denying that Jalum Chand is an influential man today and has

emerged as a leader in his own right. 'There was a time when people would say we can do without Jalum Chand, but today they realize my worth. They know that I'm a good worker who can get things done for the village,' he says. Financially, too, Jalum is much more stable than when he started off in life. He owns three *bighas* of land, which he irrigates through a bore well that he owns. He also rears his own cattle to add to his income. Seva Mandir pays him Rs 1,800 a month as a forest para-worker. All this has enabled Jalum to educate his three younger brothers who now work as contract labourers on somebody else's farm with a 50 per cent share in profit. He has also educated his younger sister till the 9th standard and is waiting to marry her off.

Shyampura, too, has benefited because of Jalum Chand's efforts. Says Harkaji, 70 years old: 'Now life is much better. We have a lot of trees, which were not there earlier. Nor do we have to go miles to fetch wood and fodder. The reservoir is also close by. Before lift irrigation was put up here, we could sow only one crop. Now we are also sowing wheat. Earlier the entire land was *banjar*.'

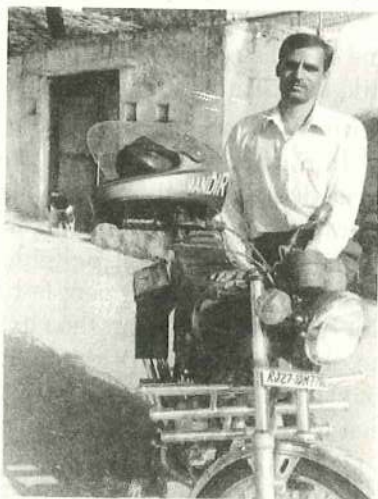
Yet problems remain. As with the rest of Rajasthan, Shyampura has received scanty rainfall in the past few years. So the harvests haven't been good. Jalum Chand says the villagers need to accept the drought as a reality and look for alternatives. Always a quick learner, he is training in better agricultural techniques to cope with the situation.

His success in the community has also spawned political aspirations in Jalum Chand's mind. But he's still thinking strategically. 'When you hold a leadership position like that of a *sarpanch*, all friends and relatives and people in the village look forward to receiving favours. It is very difficult for a *sarpanch* to work honestly as there are cuts involved at all levels. He can hardly help with any development work,' he cautions. But Jalum Chand has not ruled out the idea of emerging as a *sarpanch* one day.

His parting words also reflect Jalum Chand's strong sense of achievement: 'Seva Mandir has helped me emerge as an independent person. Today, even if I do not work for them, I know I can fend for myself.'

From Prejudice to Professionalism

Himmat Shrimali



Himmat Shrimali

With a handicapped mother and a father who had to occasionally double up for both parents, Himmat Shrimali and his siblings had a tough childhood. Himmat's father Pannalal, a poor Brahmin from Varda *gaon* near Udaipur, worked hard to educate his two sons. 'For 28 years I carried one quintal milk on my cycle to Udaipur to earn a living for the family and to pay for my children's education. Today I'm happy that my sons have settled down and are able to take care of themselves,' he says, looking back with satisfaction at his long years of struggle to create a relatively prosperous

home. The Shrimalis now boast a *pucca* house. Himmat's elder brother and parents stay on the ground floor, while Himmat, his wife, and their two sons occupy the newly-constructed first floor.

As children, the two brothers trudged 2 km. each way every day to school. Himmat's elder brother, now a teacher, completed his 12th grade, but Himmat barely managed to pass the 10th standard. 'I could not pass my 12th grade,' he says nonchalantly. He simply had no desire to study further. Economic pressures also weighed down heavily on him. 'By then I was already married and even though my father and brother wanted me to study, I realized that I needed to relieve their burden a little by earning some money,' he says.

Luckily, opportunity came knocking at his door when an acquaintance told him of Seva Mandir's plans to recruit *van sahayaks*. Himmat needed no initiation into Seva Mandir, which had launched several community initiatives in his village. He wrote a formal application and, to his delight, was selected. 'I had little hope because at least 25-30 people had come for the interview and a lot of them were from the city and were more educated than me,' he recalls with pride. In 1992 he was first posted to Badgoan *tehsil* of Udaipur district, but was soon transferred to Seva Mandir's Girwa block office.

That's when Himmat began his life's journey, passing through several trials and tribulations. At first he disliked the job he was assigned. 'I just hated my job and wanted to go back home,' he now discloses with a smile. 'I felt my Rs. 500 a month salary was a pittance for the kind of work I had to do.' His attitude also hardened because he did not belong to the place. And development work was only a job to him, not a passion or a mission to do good for others. His father and brother, however, were wiser. So they prevailed upon him to stick on. 'They literally forced me not to leave as jobs were scarce,' he says. Yet, just as he was struggling to adjust to his job, Himmat was once again transferred, this time to Suron ka Guda zone in the Girwa block itself.

Around that time, in 1994-95, Seva Mandir had launched :

watershed programme in Kojon ka Guda village. Himmat stayed there for some 7-8 months, much to the dislike of many village people. 'Initially I faced a lot of hostility. People felt I was not needed and wanted me to leave. They wanted to take over my job of inspection, measurement, and maintaining the attendance register.' Himmat soon realized that there were obvious reasons behind such hostility. The locals wanted to manipulate the system to earn some extra money. So they refused to cooperate with him. Himmat was only a teenager then, barely 17 or 18, and could hardly speak up. Also, having left home for the first time, he was very conscious of his caste. 'I was a Brahmin and they were tribals. So that was a barrier between them and me. I would carry my own water because I couldn't bring myself to drink from their vessels. I felt they were dirty people. Moreover, I detested living with them as they mostly ate non-vegetarian food.' His attitude caught the eye of the village folk, who soon complained to Seva Mandir that Himmat refused food and water in their homes. 'For close to two years I worked very hard to remove my inhibitions. And slowly, but steadily, I broke my habits, as I got more and more passionately involved with the life of the villagers.'

Himmat's leadership was put to the ultimate test in 1995 when a joint forest management programme was approved for Kojon ka Guda village. There is a 175-hectare piece of forest land in the village where people from six other neighbouring villages—Lalpura, Devda, Pavand, Padtal, and Saharia—come to collect fuel and fodder. But as soon as the JFM initiative was launched in the village, the neighbouring communities, which had enjoyed strong social and economic bonds till then, soon came to the verge of a divide. The prevailing socio-economic dynamics of the region were responsible for this situation. For years, the residents of Kojon ka Guda were the poorest of the neighbouring villages, and frequently worked as agricultural labourers in the fields of the affluent people in Padtal and Saharia. Several families in Padtal worked in the mines, earning between Rs. 5,000 and Rs. 20,000 per month. This made them quite powerful, with a grip on local politics. The traditional leaders, on the other

hand, came from Saharia where agricultural income was higher. These conditions left the residents of Kojon ka Guda at the mercy of their influential neighbouring villagers. But now that Seva Mandir had brought the JFM initiative to the region, giving forest rights to only the residents of Kojon ka Guda, as per the *Forest Settlement Record*, the others began to feel threatened. Not only would they lose their rights to the forest, but their social and power equations would also be adversely affected. Soon the residents of Padtal staked their claim to the ownership of the forest, asserting that their ancestors belonged to Umra and had later settled some distance to the north-east of the present-day Kojon ka Guda. Hence they stated that they were the original inhabitants of Kojon ka Guda. Their claim was supported by the fact that many of the Padtal farmers owned agricultural land in Kojon ka Guda.

Things finally came to a head when work started at the JFM site. The people of Padtal and Saharia took strong exception and threatened dire consequences if they were not given their due. Fearing a law and order problem, the forest department decided to stop work.

Himmat, backed by Seva Mandir, worked relentlessly to resolve the crisis. Meeting after meeting was held. But the crisis had come to such a point that people refused to either talk or meet. All social ties and relations became strained. People stopped visiting each other's homes, attending weddings or funerals and mourning sessions. They even started suspecting the motives of Seva Mandir, accusing some of its workers of instigating fights among the villagers. Notwithstanding the conflict in leadership and the ego clashes that were taking place, Himmat took upon himself the task of bridging barriers. He started talking to people who were not directly involved in the fight. He realized, and conveyed as much to Seva Mandir, that only a forest committee comprising members from all the three villages of Kojon ka Guda, Padtal, and Saharia could help resolve the crisis.

Himmat soon found a way out for easing tensions and

interacting with people. He started attending weddings and functions in the area, which gave him an opportunity to meet people from the three villages. But he was careful not to go alone, lest the villagers vent their ire on him. He took the village *pradhan* with him. Even though people were not very happy to see an uninvited guest amongst them, they would not grudge him food. However, they were still determined not to talk to him on the JFM issue.

Today, after a seven-year-long deadlock, when the three villages are ready to take on the JFM project once again, the villagers are more than generous in showering their praise on Himmat for his role in resolving the crisis. Says 60-year-old Ramaji from Kojon ka Guda: 'Himmat's initiatives to resolve the problem were more than ours. He would give us information from the forest department and also from the other hamlets.' People from other villages also feel the same. Says Logar of Padtal village who is also president of the forest protection committee: 'Himmat has really worked hard to resolve the crisis. He would regularly meet us and talk to us. He is instrumental in bringing all of us back together.'

As for Himmat, through all these crisis-ridden years, he held steadfastly to one great goal: the resolution of the conflict. And that interest was preserved. 'When I arrived here, there was a lot of harmony among the villagers, but in a flash the entire scenario had changed and precipitated into a conflict. Somewhere, my conscience pricked me that I was also responsible for the conflict. So I felt I had to work towards its resolution,' he says. His ability to win friends and influence people probably helped him come a long way. 'I have never instigated people against each other nor carried tales from one village to the other,' he adds. The ability to stay neutral also helped him earn the respect of the people and allowed his stature as a leader to grow.

Meanwhile, Seva Mandir also used a bit of coercion to bring the parties to the negotiating table. It suspended all developmental activities in the three villages. 'We made it clear that work on all other projects would only be resumed if they decided to bury their differences,' Himmat says. Drought for

the past three years has had a crippling effect on the local economy. You can see the desperation of the villagers. Kojon ka Guda has been left completely dry and barren, bereft of tree cover or any vegetation whatsoever. Ramaji sums up the situation aptly: 'There is hardly any water. The hand pump just runs for 2-3 hours a day and that too only very early in the morning. However, Kojon ka Guda was not always a dry patch of land. Earlier, when I was a child, there was a dense jungle with a river flowing right near our house. Today, the river bed is just strewn with stones. The drought has robbed us of everything.'

'They were forced to realize that this fight would not take them anywhere and would only aggravate their misery and poverty. They realized it late, but nevertheless they did,' says Himmat. Talks for an amicable settlement began, and in 2000 a committee was formed comprising members of all the three villages. Some community members like Premji, former *sarpanch* from Saharia, Nathu from Padtal, and Kaluji from Kojon ka Guda took an active interest and called caste *panchayat*¹ meetings to resolve the problem. 'We were the force behind these few men and encouraged them to talk to people on how they could start work,' Himmat adds.

Not only did his initiatives and struggle bear fruit for the villagers, but Seva Mandir also recognized Himmat's contribution. He was promoted as a zonal worker in the area and received the U. M. Lodha Award in 2001 for his leadership qualities. Himmat today earns a salary of around Rs. 3,000 a month. A five-*bigha* piece of farm land takes care of his family's food needs.

'I felt very proud when I got the award because with limited education and at a very young age I have been able to reach this level. This award has given me a lot of satisfaction and happiness. My family members are also very happy with the recognition that I have got. Now I don't consider my work as just another job. I'm concentrating on institution-building

¹ People from all the three hamlets belong to the Rawat Meena caste.

work and I see my future in that.' For Himmat, salary is no measure of success. 'My work in Seva Mandir has given me a lot of self-confidence, which no factory work would have provided. I would have been at best a bonded labourer there. Today I'm able to talk to the police, to the *patwari*, or in a *panchayat* without any fear. I consider this a very big achievement in my life,' he says.

However, it is home and family where human beings begin their life's journey and these are the places where they stake their trust. So what happens when your home becomes unstable? Himmat's family has been shattered by congenital illness that has long plagued them. Himmat's eldest son, born healthy, was suddenly struck by paralysis as a child, rendering him an invalid who can no longer walk. Doctors say the child is suffering from a peculiar genetic disease, which cannot be cured, having probably inherited it from Himmat's mother Ram Pyari. What is worse, now the younger son is also showing early symptoms and the doctor fears he might soon also be struck down by the same disease. 'The entire family is worried about them. That's the only problem we have. We are all extremely sad and troubled,' says Ram Pyari as tears roll down her cheeks.

Himmat's wife Basanti quietly goes around doing the household chores. She is not only dealing with a personal tragedy, but also coping with social and family pressures that blame a woman for all the family's miseries. She confides that her in-laws would like to get another wife for Himmat in the hope that he will father a healthy child. This, notwithstanding the possibility that the genetic disorder may have actually been inherited from Himmat's side. Basanti, having already taken to family planning, cannot bear another child. And her husband prefers to remain ambivalent regarding his future marital options. While he realizes that the disease could be genetic and that another child could also develop similar symptoms, Himmat does not completely rule out the option of a second marriage. He hides his desire under the garb of family pressure, convincing us that, after all, he's only human.

Leadership with Courage

Susheela Devi



Susheela Devi

Susheela Devi, now 32 years old, was barely eight when she lost her mother. Her furrowed face and sunken eyes testify to the years of hard struggle that she had to endure at a young age. Luckily, Susheela had the advantage of early schooling. She was married off at the tender age of 14 to a construction worker, Devilal.

That's really when Susheela's remarkable story begins.

She started her new life as a teenage wife in Karawadi, a village 30 km. from Udaipur city, in the Badgoan block.

Karawadi, situated in a hilly area, is populated by barely 60 households, all belonging to the Gameti tribals.

In the early years of her marriage, Susheela, also a Gameti tribal, went through a great deal of emotional trauma. At our first encounter, she hesitates to reveal more details. But probe a little deeper, and she eventually opens up so that others may draw inspiration from her example.

Casting her eyes afar, Susheela discloses that soon after her marriage she learned that Devilal had been engaged to another woman when he had chosen to take her as a life partner. After Susheela's first child (a daughter) was born, her husband brought the other woman home to live with them. Sadly for Susheela, her in-laws neither complained nor protested on her behalf, since she had failed to produce a son. However, today she is the proud mother of two sons besides her elder daughter. 'I was very unhappy during those days. My health deteriorated and I became very thin. But the arrival of my sons strengthened my position in the house,' Susheela says. Left out of the family loop and failing to deliver a child, the other woman left of her own accord.

With her married life somewhat more stable, Susheela yearned for more. But she didn't have a clue about what to do with her life. 'Somewhere deep down, I still felt bad about being married off to a villager, when, in fact, I was born and grew up in a town (Bedla) ... I felt as if incomplete,' she says. But unknown to her and her family, she was destined to serve her *samaj* in a significant way.¹

Fortune smiled on Susheela once more when she chanced upon Rama *behenji*, a Seva Mandir worker, at the local Sheetla Mata Mandir one day. This was some time in the mid-1980s. Rama *behenji* was seeking to introduce the concept of self-help groups among the tribals of Karawadi. So far, Seva Mandir has helped set up nearly 356 SHGs, with a combined membership of over 7,000 women and with deposits of around Rs. 29 lakhs in several community kitties. The SHGs encourage women to operate, explore, and pursue sundry income-generating opportunities.

¹ Bedla is actually a very small township near Udaipur.

Before Seva Mandir began working on the SHG scheme in Karawadi, it had already helped the villagers set up the *gram vikas kosh*.

Setting up the SHG was no easy task. The men were suspicious of their women gathering in public places. Although Susheela's family was one of the first to volunteer, it still wasn't easy. At first, like others in the village, her husband and in-laws resisted the idea of Susheela moving about in public. Household chores would get neglected, they complained. But Rama *behenji* managed to win them over. Slowly, other women of the village followed Susheela's example, albeit one at a time. Some men, still suspicious, sat in at the meetings to find out what their women were actually up to. Somehow, that practice continues even today.

Seva Mandir helped set up Karawadi's SHG with just 12 members, each contributing Rs. 2 a month. Membership increased to 20 participants after the first year. Now there are 50 members, split into two groups, with Susheela as the secretary of one of the groups. While one group has 30 members, the rest are with the second. Four years ago, the SHG upped the membership deposits to Rs. 50 per month, and the kitty has since swelled to Rs. 73,000. Every member is entitled to receive a loan of up to Rs. 6,000 at one time, with an interest rate of Re. 1 for every Rs. 100 per month. The fund has proved to be useful in times of crisis. It also manages an emergency account to help non-members in distress.

Some 18 months after the SHG was up and running, the women came around to agreeing on the need for a health worker in the village. But since almost all of them were unlettered, and the health worker needed to be trained, a volunteer was needed. That was when all eyes turned to Susheela once more. Everybody knew she had been to school in a town. But Susheela herself was unsure at first. Her husband also refused to send her off to Kaya, 48 km. away, for a week-long training programme. Finally, her persistence paid off. Susheela underwent the training programme, learning bit by bit how to write her first medical reports. Today, besides managing the SHG, Susheela also doubles up as a Seva

Mandir health worker and assists the ANM (auxiliary nurse and midwife) worker to run immunization camps. She also helps with emergency childbirths by arranging to shift pregnant women to the hospital. Susheela educates the villagers on sundry government support schemes for those living below the poverty line, for pensioners, and for the handicapped.

'Earlier, all I knew was how to work in the fields. Now I know many more things thanks to the exposure to the outside world that I have received,' she says. What's more, her husband has also learnt to trust her now.

Susheela's moment under the sun came between 1994 and 1999 when Karawadi's villagers elected her as the *ward panch* of her village where the seat was reserved for a woman. During her tenure in office she succeeded in getting a school constructed for the children of Karawadi.

When the administration sanctioned a school for Karawadi in 1994, the villagers got excited. But they soon had to face opposition from an unexpected quarter. The *sarpanch* complained that there was no way a school could be built, as there was no access road to the village to bring in the construction material. The villagers conceded the truth of this complaint, for their only access to the outside world was a dirt track traversing across the hill to the opposite side where it linked up with the state highway. Who could haul the building material over such a long distance, indeed?

It was Susheela, spirited and determined, who questioned the assumptions of the villagers and urged them to action. 'If the access isn't there, we'll create one first. Let's have a road and get the building material over,' Susheela argued at a women's meeting. However, that was easier said than done. How was this goal to be achieved? Shunned by their menfolk for daring to take on the *sarpanch* himself, Susheela nevertheless successfully motivated and organized the members of her self-help group to undertake *shramdan*. Thus, the women of Karawadi performed voluntary labour, and dug up around the hillside to build the first mud road, making their village accessible to the outside world. Despite that Herculean effort,

however, the school still seemed far from possible. The *sarpanch* still wanted his own way. So he instigated the transporter to refuse to undertake the uphill drive to bring the building material to the village on his truck. By now the women led by Susheela were equally determined not to give up the fight without a last-ditch effort. They had toiled and laboured for days to make the road happen. One by one, they carried the entire building material on their heads up the hill and beyond. That was when the men finally woke up to the resolve and resilience of their womenfolk, and they also joined the effort to construct the school building.

Bested at his own game, the *sarpanch* cried revenge. But much to his discomfort, Susheela kept back the muster roll and personally monitored the entries, preventing any fake entry by the *sarpanch*. 'The *sarpanch* was infuriated, and withheld payments for material and labour. I had to face a lot of harassment from the people who worked in constructing the school. They would appear at my doorstep every day demanding their payment,' Susheela recalls. It took five and a half months to build the school. Today the school stands tall as a tribute to the proud women of the Karawadi community. And that tribute holds true because, as Susheela says, every single girl child in Karawadi goes to school today.

Soon thereafter the residents of Karawadi also had to deal with encroachments on their common pasture where they graze their cattle. Much to the surprise of the villagers, one fine morning a man from a neighbouring village started building a boundary wall around the pasture. What was the motive? Was it a case of land grabbing by an outsider? No one dared raise these questions. That's when Susheela walked up to the intruder one morning and asked him what he was up to. The man chose to ignore her question and continued at his work. Susheela then brought up the matter at one of the SHG meetings. Everyone agreed that the man should be evicted. But the menfolk of Karawadi did not bother to pursue the matter. Then thirty women of the SHG marched to the village common land and demanded that work be stopped. The intruder refused to pay heed, showing some papers instead and claiming the land as his.

'I saw the papers and immediately realized they were fake.

None of the papers had the government stamp on them. We tore up the papers there and then,' says Susheela of that incident. Fifteen days passed by in a deadlock. The outsider approached the *sarpanch*. It was the same *sarpanch* who had earlier created roadblocks in the building of the school. Fortunately, the *sarpanch* had now learnt his lesson. 'He was wary of taking up another fight with us,' says Susheela with a twinkle in her eyes. The *sarpanch* agreed that the outsider should be evicted. That's when the women got together and tore down the boundary wall. The men joined in only later with a helping hand. Today the common land stays just that way — common land where the village residents graze their cattle.

Susheela, who has now been associated with Seva Mandir for a number of years, is aware of the organization's work in afforesting degraded village common lands. She hopes to take up afforestation work on her own village commons one day.

Susheela was given the U. M. Lodha Award in 2001 in recognition of her hard work and community service. In keeping with her leadership role, Susheela now encourages other women of her village to participate in Seva Mandir training programmes. Talking about the award, she says: 'I know how hard I worked. If you are honest, then others will come forward and help.' Running a self-help group has also turned Susheela into a clever entrepreneur. In fact, she has lent her Rs. 1,000 prize money to a woman from a neighbouring village, which has no self-help group of its own, charging a 3 per cent monthly rate of interest.

What made Susheela decide to pursue a common cause that would benefit the entire village, more so when her activities were fraught with danger?

One may conjecture that perhaps she could afford to venture out into the public arena insulated and protected by the relative prosperity of her family. Her family owns eight *bighas* of land on which they grow maize, wheat, and vegetables. They also have five goats and some 25 sheep. The family has a two-room house with another two rooms for the livestock. Susheela's husband works for half the year, during

which period he earns nearly Rs. 18,000. Her father-in-law works in the nearby Eklingji Temple as a security guard for Rs. 2,000 per month. Susheela gets a monthly stipend of Rs. 500 from Seva Mandir.

But Susheela offers a different explanation for the motive behind her social activism which transcends the desire for merely economic or material gain. She says: 'It is women who have to ultimately bear the burden of the family's responsibilities. If we don't come forward, nobody else will work for the upliftment of our village.'

Perhaps it is this sense of mission that drives Susheela to go forward in her struggles. 'I would like to grow beyond being a health worker and be the health in-charge for the entire zone, covering several villages. I'm sure my family will support my efforts. The people of my village have always supported me as well,' she says.

It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that Susheela nurtures a desire to be the *sarpanch* one day. 'I'm waiting for a woman *sarpanch* seat in my village. Whenever there is one, I'll stand for elections,' she says confidently. If she ever becomes a *sarpanch*, it will be interesting to see whether she can hold on to the same values that she professes and propagates today. Or will she allow herself to be co-opted by the local power structure? If she chooses the latter course of action, she could well lose her support base in the community. But that is for the future to tell.

As for now, there are several positive outcomes of Susheela's leadership role. In a sense, her empowerment is also influencing the gender dynamics within her own household. She is determined to make her 15-year-old daughter complete her studies. Although the girl has already been engaged to the son of a Hindustan Zinc Ltd. supervisor, Susheela will marry her off only when she completes 18 years. 'Early marriage would result in early pregnancy. This is not good for her health,' she says.

Now, 18 years later after her own marriage, Susheela is at the forefront of initiating like-minded women from her village into development work. As she travels along the path

of her life's journey, her actions have come to exemplify the importance of preserving the community's heritage for the better living of the local people and for the common good. She has put these valuable lessons to good use, first to set up a village primary school, then to activate primary health services where none had existed before, and finally to evict neighbouring villagers from the community's common land.

Surviving Patriarchy

Mani Devi



Mani Devi

As the eldest of five sisters, Mani Devi remained an illiterate. This wasn't because her parents could not afford a formal education for their daughters. Rather, she says, she missed out on studies because of 'a lack of awareness' about the importance of sending the girl child to school. As a 10-year-old girl, Mani Devi learnt to plough the field instead. Her father, a police *sipahi*, didn't want to waste money on employing labourers. So he sent Mani Devi to the field.¹

When she was 17, she was married to Heeralal, a construction worker, of Dabasia village, in Kherwada *tehsil*, 115 km.

¹ Ploughing by women may be rare, but it is not entirely unknown in these parts of the country. Quite a number of women said they have been ploughing fields even as children.

from Udaipur. Life at her in-laws' house went on as usual, as with most other rural women.

'For several years after my marriage I only did household work. I would get up at the crack of dawn and engage in grinding, sweeping, cooking, pasting cow dung on the walls, working in the field, and fetching water,' she says. Like the other women around, she worked seven days a week, 365 days a year. Meanwhile, she also became a mother. It was while raising their two sons and two daughters that Mani Devi and Heeralal had to face a lot of emotional trauma. Much as she desired to educate her children, her eldest son was not interested in studies. Though he managed to complete the 10th grade, Mani Devi wanted him to study further. But then, one fine morning, he went missing. He could not be traced for the next seven months. The family was overwhelmed by the sudden loss of their son. 'My husband was finally able to trace him through friends in Ahmedabad where he had landed after living in Surat and Mumbai. We put a lot of pressure on him to come back and study further, but he refused,' Mani Devi says.

Today Mani Devi remembers those trying times with a smile. Her son now works in a mill in Ahmedabad. She got him married a year ago, and her daughter-in-law now lives with her. Her eldest daughter, almost 17, is also not keen on studies. So the family is looking around for a groom. Mani Devi's two younger children are still in school. It will be a while before she knows which way they will go.

Meanwhile, Mani Devi's life has changed. And here's how.

In 1995 Mani Devi was elected a *ward panch* for five years. Then, a year later, she came across a Seva Mandir worker, Dhanu *behenji*. After a few encounters, Mani Devi became interested in the kind of work that Dhanu *behenji* did. She attended a few meetings of Seva Mandir, and then joined the organization as a *mahila karyakarta* in 1996. However, her illiteracy soon posed a major problem for Mani Devi. She knew that as a development volunteer hampered by illiteracy she could only go this far and no further.

'That was when I got to know of the literacy camps Seva Mandir conducted,' she says. One such camp took place at

Seva Mandir's Kaya training centre near Udaipur. Mani Devi decided to attend the camp, nearly 100 km. from her village, and held firm in her resolve. Her strong desire to better herself helped her overcome her initial fears of stepping out alone from the secure boundaries of her house and village into an unknown world. She attended the camps for ten days spread over two months. 'I took a lot of pains to learn to read and write. Even after the training, I made a lot of effort on my own. I regularly read magazines and newsletters to make reading a habit,' she says. That single act of self-assertion has helped Mani Devi come a long way today. It is not easy to quantify this kind of success, but she has definitely succeeded in freeing herself in many ways from the culture in which she grew up and got married. Almost all the other women in her family and in the village are illiterate. Mani Devi, now in her 40s, writes all the official reports herself.

Her training also enthused her to work for Seva Mandir with new vigour and zeal. She did this first by organizing the village women into a self-help group; today it boasts 22 members, with each member contributing Rs. 25 a month to a common welfare kitty. The SHG in turn allowed Mani Devi to interact with women and to help them take stock of their lives. At these meetings, she encouraged the women to discuss issues like *mahavari*, health and hygiene, and problems related to reproductive and sexual health such as the spacing of children, pregnancy, and vaginal discharge, Mani Devi says, quite unfazed in the presence of several men hanging around. Today she feels no inhibition in publicly discussing women's health issues. 'I have also taken training to talk on these subjects in public with confidence. I don't feel shy discussing these openly even in front of men,' she says.

But if one is looking to find a case study of feminist resistance among rural Indian women here, then one will be disappointed. When needed Mani Devi also readily accepts the cultural moorings that bind women to their society. As she approaches her village elders she is quick to cover her face with her sari, in a mark of respect. However, although she observes traditional customs, this has not stopped her from asserting her independence when it is time to take a stand on

matters important to her. She did not back down when her in-laws strongly disapproved of her traveling alone out of the village on Seva Mandir's work.

For this, she also thanks her husband for standing by her side. Heeralal admits as much: 'I have had to defend her a lot. My brothers would fight with me and ask, 'Why do you send your wife alone outside the village?' Heeralal believes that women, like men, should also go out and work. 'I encourage and help her. I have complete faith in her,' he says. 'At least, she is more aware than most of us and is creating awareness in the village. Her job too is fetching some extra income for the family,' Heeralal confides candidly. Heeralal is himself good at managing the household and faces few problems while his wife is away. 'Now he does not have to bother with that either, since our daughter-in-law stays with us,' Mani Devi hastens to add.

However, Mani Devi admits that her independence flowered only after she and Heeralal moved out of his parents' home and built a house of their own. Parents in Rajasthani communities spend their old age with the youngest son after marrying off their other children. The family helps the other sons to settle down in independent homes. 'I couldn't have stayed in Kaya for ten days had they been living with us. They wouldn't have allowed that,' Mani Devi says.

Besides the training she received at the Seva Mandir camp, traveling outside her village also taught Mani Devi to learn from the experiences of other people. On one such trip to Bhopal (she has traveled to several places outside her district as well as to other states), she learnt about small credit schemes run by self-help groups. Back in her village, Mani Devi started another SHG through which women could take out loans at a nominal rate of interest. The money is deposited in a box and placed under Mani Devi's charge.

As a *ward panch*, Mani Devi had shown evidence of leadership abilities even before she joined Seva Mandir. A job with Seva Mandir coupled with a seat on the *panchayat* further boosted her confidence. Working through the *panchayat*, Mani Devi was able to bring the first school, the Rajiv Gandhi Pathshala, to her village. Earlier the children of Dabasia had to walk 4 km. to the nearest school.

But her position of authority in the village also put pressure on her to curry favours on behalf of friends and relatives. Her septuagenarian mother-in-law, Kesar Bai, was upset that Mani Devi refused to swing a pension in her favour. 'When she was in the *panchayat*, I requested her to get me a widow's pension (the government pays Rs. 200 a month to widows who are not looked after by their family). But she refused to help,' she complains. Mani Devi, however, says that helping her mother-in-law posed an ethical dilemma: 'While it was a very easy thing to do, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Why should I when we are all taking care of her needs?' she asks, reflecting her strong character and innate moral sensibility.

Kesar Bai also complains that despite helping to create awareness among the villagers, Mani Devi hasn't been able to get hand pumps installed in the village. Dabasia, which now has 90 households, has just two common wells. Even Mani Devi's family has to walk a kilometer, through a hilly tract, to reach the nearest well.

Meanwhile, Mani Devi led her fellow villagers on a crusade against the theft of common village resources. In 1998-99, women from neighbouring villages occasionally came to steal wood and grass from their forest. There was a forest guard, but he proved to be useless. The women, in a group of 60 to 70, would sneak in early in the morning much before the guard arrived. Mani Devi met a forest official to seek help, and the guard was asked to report to duty early. One day the guard apprehended the women, who hit back at him in retaliation. Scared, the guard ran to Mani Devi's house for help. Mani Devi, who was still the *ward panch* at the time, told the guard not to be frightened and asked him to report the matter to the police instead. The next day four policemen came along with the forest guard and nearly 15 men from the village accompanied them to the jungle. They managed to intercept the women once again. The police threatened the women before letting them off, even as they themselves loaded all the wood left behind by the women into a truck and took it away.

Although the theft of forest fuel stopped, the village forest faced another kind of encroachment. A few families started settling down on some portions of the jungle, building

mud-plastered huts. 'We tried stopping them. Several times I personally spoke to them, trying to persuade them against encroaching. Instead, they even started farming in the jungle. This was a serious matter and we warned them to stop it,' Mani Devi says. Things came to a head when, in order to take revenge, the encroachers kidnapped Mani Devi's brother-in-law, seriously injured him, and locked him up in a room. 'When we found him he was in a serious condition. We reported the matter to the *panchayat* and the police. The police arrested a few people.' That was when the entire *panchayat* met and decided to remove the encroachments once and for all. The encroachers, faced with the collective opposition of the united village, had little choice but to move out. For a more permanent solution to the encroachment problem, Mani Devi organized the villagers to sprinkle *kesar* in the forest area².

Though she is exuberant while relating her achievements in community welfare, Mani Devi looks somewhat dejected when talking about the *balwadi* centre in Dabasia. 'I helped get the *balwadi* centre going and initiated the proposal to Seva Mandir. But while I get just Rs. 500 a month, the teacher in the *balwadi* centre gets double my salary,' she complains bitterly. Mani Devi obviously chooses to overlook a crucial difference: the *balwadi* teacher has passed the 12th grade, while she herself missed out on formal education.

Yet Mani Devi isn't a quitter. Her important role as a community leader was acknowledged when she received the U. M. Lodha Award in 2002. Deep down, she fully realizes the significance of this public recognition of her contribution to community welfare. 'I was very happy and felt proud receiving the award,' she says quite excitedly. However, the values that inform and motivate her seem to be the aspiration of ensuring a flourishing and economically self-sufficient family. Her job with Seva Mandir has no doubt broadened her outlook as well as deepened her sense of the possibilities that the world has to offer women such as herself.

² People in Rajasthan believe that the sprinkling of saffron over the forest renders it sacred and thus puts a moral restraint on people against felling trees.

Striving for Dignity

Bhima Dhula



Bhima Dhula

Sometime around 1986 Bhima Dhula left his secure government job with a Rs. 500 per month salary to join Seva Mandir. Bhima, now over 60 years of age, is a slightly reserved person and won't easily tell you why he gave up his job of a cattle guard with the forest department. Nor will he say why he agreed to take a salary cut when he joined Seva Mandir as a *van pal* on a monthly salary of only Rs. 150. Instead, he insists that a friend convinced him to join the organization.

Whatever the reason, the decision must have been a big one for Bhima, who actually made a mid-life career switch, opting for community development work. This, when for most villagers there can possibly be nothing more important than a government job. It's been a long and eventful journey for Bhima ever since.

Yet when you probe deeper into Bhima's past, it appears that he was born to be a change agent for his community right from his early years. Bhima, a resident of Gadonia village in Kherwada *tehsil*, 125 km. from Udaipur, fought with his illiterate father to be sent to school. 'I fought with my father because he wouldn't send me to school which was 5 km. away,' he says. He won that fight and went to school, but he could only continue his studies till the 5th standard. His father soon needed somebody to tend his cattle and work in the fields. Bhima, the elder of two siblings, offered to become the sacrificial lamb so that his brother could go to school instead. 'I gave up my studies to graze cattle and work in the fields and sent my brother to school instead,' he says. Bhima helped his brother study till the 12th standard, but regrets that his brother let him down. 'He did not make much use of his education and could not get a job,' he laments. Despite being more qualified than Bhima and most other villagers, his brother works in the fields today.

Earlier in his life, like most able-bodied men from his village, Bhima travelled to Gujarat in search of better employment. 'I worked there as a labourer. But I couldn't do that job for long. So I returned two months later. That was when I joined the forest department and worked as a cattle guard for five years.' Then a new chapter opened in Bhima's life. Seva Mandir provided him with the stepping stones to a future leadership role. Being the son of a *mukhiya* also helped him gain acceptance as a community leader.

Over the years Bhima has concentrated his attention on raising a plantation in his village, where the villagers first neglected and then destroyed the community pasture. To make matters worse, a few of them had also encroached on this common land. So Bhima took it upon himself to convince

the villagers to develop the community land for the common good. With this began a struggle to help people understand what development work is all about. The encroachers were particularly difficult. 'Two families had encroached on some portions of the pasture and refused to leave. I tried my best to convince them and even organized meetings. But they were adamant,' recalls Bhima. And not just that, they even threatened to use all force to keep the land to themselves.

One day, as the villagers were erecting a boundary wall around the pasture, some among the encroachers came over to stop the work. Bhima tried to intervene. 'But somebody from their side suddenly took out a pistol, and, pointing it towards me, fired.' Fortunately for Bhima, the bullet whizzed past him, missing its target.

A religious man who doesn't even eat outside his home, he thanks the Almighty for saving his life. 'We realized that we were working on a complex mission and that we needed to arrive at a quick settlement before things got out of hand,' Bhima says. Yet he does not believe in acting in haste, while weighed down by a rush of blood to the head. The grey hair that he had acquired over the years testifies to the wisdom wrought by long experience, which now stands him in good stead as a village elder. Religion too helped shape his personality. 'Whenever I go out on a task I always pray to God and He always shows me the way,' Bhima adds.

'There was a lot of tension over this incident in the village, and the next day work on the boundary wall stopped,' he says. This prompted Bhima to handle the delicate situation more tactfully rather than encouraging the flaring up of community passions. He initiated a meeting of the village people and prevailed upon them to enter into a compromise. The villagers decided to leave a little portion of the land for the two families. Gradually, a wall was erected around what was left as common property, and finally the pasture was developed for the benefit of the people. Over the years, Bhima has also been instrumental in helping form village committees in Gadonia and the seven neighbouring villages. Now he is deeply involved in forming a *lok adalat* in Gadonia, a concept

introduced to him by Seva Mandir, he says. 'The *lok adalat* will help resolve disputes between neighbouring *panchayats*. It will help us minimize police atrocities against poor people who have nowhere else to go,' he says.

Bhima's contribution to promoting the development of his village cannot be termed small by any measure. A hard working and honest man — the villagers also admit as much — Bhima is, however, having a tough time satisfying village people desperately in need of jobs. The ongoing drought seems to have deeply affected the people of Gadonia, a 6-km. drive off the highway through a *kuccha* hilly track. Most families in Gadonia and its four hamlets survive below the poverty line, growing only one crop a year, which is maize. Life here is harsh.

Bhima lives in the village with his wife and younger son. His eldest son, now married, lives separately, in keeping with the local custom. But here too Bhima has had to make sacrifices. His elder son refused to move out of the bigger family house. So Bhima was forced out instead, and had to build a smaller house with help from his wife and younger son.

That said and done, there are far more community issues that need to be tackled. This is why the locals, too, are more eager to discuss their problems than sing paeans to Bhima. As Nouni Bai, a villager, pleads: 'We have no grains in our homes. The drought is killing us all. We need jobs. Please help us.'

The villagers are now eagerly awaiting the setting up of a watershed works in a nearby hamlet, which is likely to provide employment to a number of Gadonia's residents.

Jhalu Ram, an enterprising farmer who owns trees worth nearly Rs. 4 lakh on his land, aptly sums up the mood of the people and the predicament that Bhima now faces: 'Today education is bringing awareness, but little in terms of livelihood. There are no government jobs. Earlier there were some jobs in Gujarat, but now even those are hard to find because they too have acute water problems. So there is frustration all around. And people want quick-fix solutions. They are not ready to wait to see the fruits of their labour. It is very difficult

to make them understand. It took me thirty years to make my family understand how to improve our farm land. That makes Bhima's efforts to explain development initiatives to an entire community so much harder and near impossible.'

'However, Bhima has done a good job of motivating people. He has worked very hard to remove encroachments. People from the village also supported him,' adds Jhalu Ram.

Still all is not lost in the face of drought and poverty. Village leaders like Bhima have helped create awareness and people realize the need for protecting trees and preserving water. 'Otherwise, this land will soon become another *registan*,' as one of the villagers put it.

As for Bhima, he is not disillusioned. Despite his age, he is full of energy and vitality and is eager to do much more. 'I felt very proud when I was given the U.M. Lodha Award in 2002 for my work. The money, which was spent on buying household goods, was not so important to me. The recognition I got gave me a lot of satisfaction,' he says with a smile.

Overcoming Affliction

Savita Devi



Savita Devi

Savita Devi was born into a poor tribal family in a village called Garanwas, in Udaipur. Unlike her five sisters and four brothers, she was desperate to study from an early age. She struggled to go to school against family disapproval and social pressure. This was at a time when the villagers hardly recognized the value of education and actively discouraged their daughters from going to school. For obvious reasons, her parents, overstretched from having to look after a large family, never encouraged their children to study. But Savita

Devi did not weaken in her resolve, and studied up to the 5th standard till she eventually got married. 'None of my brothers and sisters went to school because our parents never encouraged us to do so,' she says.

For the past 13 years following her marriage, Savita Devi has been living in Naya Khola, 82 km. from Udaipur. There are 175 households in Naya Khola, most of them belonging to *adivasis* who live below the poverty line. Even after her marriage, Savita Devi did not give up her desire for learning and enrolled herself at Seva Mandir's local non-formal education centre. Her husband Heeralal who had studied up to the 8th standard encouraged and helped her through school.

Being quite a social person himself, Heeralal encouraged the men in the village to regularly gather at his house. It was at these gatherings that Savita Devi gradually lost her inhibition and actively took to interacting with the men. She would sit in at their meetings, where she was encouraged by her husband to participate in the discussions on community welfare. Her outgoing personality had manifested itself at a very young age, when she had played *kabbadi* with the boys of her village. Now, with her husband's support, Savita Devi's confidence grew and eventually shaped her into a capable community leader.

Heeralal comes across as a calm and dignified person. Forever smiling, he goes around quietly engaged in household chores, washing utensils and making tea. Heeralal obviously admires his wife, but not in the way that many henpecked husbands appear to do. He shares his wife's concern for community development. In fact, their husband-wife partnership in the field of community development work in a patriarchal society like Rajasthan is quite remarkable.

In the early 1990s, Savita Devi rallied the villagers to come around and discuss how to get electricity to the village. That initiative helped her gain recognition in the community. Next, she motivated the villagers to build a *chabootra* within the village temple where people could come together for meetings, festivals, and *bhajan* singing sessions, which Savita Devi and her husband actively promote, being followers of the Kabir Panth.

Soon Savita Devi took upon herself the task of organizing the village women to sit together and discuss the issues affecting their lives. She first spoke to the men about this proposal and they agreed. 'Initially, the women felt extremely embarrassed, even of me,' she laughs. The meetings helped the women of Naya Khola grow in confidence. They soon formed a self-help group, with Savita Devi as its secretary. Men and women even started sitting together to discuss ways of tackling tricky issues like protecting their forest.

The social dynamics of Naya Khola do not appear to be fragmented. Even so, beneath the seemingly tranquil surface of everyday life in the village tensions simmer and quarrels wait to erupt into the open.

Women in the neighbouring villages were engaged in the rampant theft of forest wood. The men found it convenient to pitch women against women, lest they be accused of molestation. From these circumstances was born a women's force in Naya Khola led by Savita Devi. At least 40 women would go together to keep watch in the forest. Women worked hard at guarding the forest from 7 till 9 in the morning, when most of them were normally busy with household chores. Savita Devi proudly narrates her adventures, replete with the choicest swear words and colourful local expressions, even as she laughingly recounts incidents when the Naya Khola women came to blows with the women from the neighbouring villages. 'We fought for one whole year to free the forests of trespassers who would come and steal wood,' she says. What helped matters was that Savita Devi was also elected unopposed as the *ward panch* around that time, in 1995.

As *ward panch*, Savita Devi received the necessary exposure that helped her to mature into an experienced leader. 'Initially I was very uncomfortable sitting in the *panchayat* because I knew nothing. But during that period I learnt a lot about forests and about *panchayati raj* in general. My courage in taking on the issue of protecting the jungle also made the women in the village believe in me,' she reminisces. She launched several crusades such as preventing the sale of liquor in the

village during the daytime because men would get drunk and abuse their women; she even forced a villager to apologize to his wife for regularly beating her up after getting drunk.

Once she also threatened and forced a man from a neighbouring village to pay a fine for stealing wood from the forest. 'We spotted him stealing wood from our forest. I, along with a few other women, followed and threatened him. We made up this story that the DFO would be visiting our village the next day and we would file a case against him. By then, the men of our village reached the spot and told the trespasser that the women of our village are very dangerous and mean to do whatever they say. That scared the trespasser and he pleaded with our menfolk to save him. We insisted that he would have to pay a fine of Rs. 500. We then enacted yet another drama. We told our men that if they planned to stand surety for the trespasser they would have to deposit their silver *kada* with us. However, on our way back to the village, we returned the *kada*. The next day the trespasser came and paid the fine.'

Later, at a meeting in Udaipur, Savita Devi drew up the courage to narrate this incident in the presence of those very men who were actually responsible for trying to steal wood from the village. 'They tried to shout me down. But I was not scared because I was only speaking the truth,' she says.

Seva Mandir first spotted the leadership qualities in Savita Devi at its Environment Day celebrations in 1998. She was quick to understand the need for development. She was able to create her own identity and was not scared of airing her views in public, unlike some members of other women's groups from the nearby villages. Savita Devi also stood for the post of *sarpanch* in the *panchayat* elections, but lost by only six votes. 'During the fag end of the campaign I began to lose interest and so lost the elections,' she says, apparently without much regret. Despite a lot of coaxing, Savita Devi is reluctant to reveal why she actually lost interest at the last minute, but she does say: 'Despite losing the contest, the people expected me to take the lead and do all the talking on behalf of the *sarpanch*.'

Today Savita Devi, tall and slim, has emerged as a fiery woman with a forceful and aggressive personality. However, lack of opportunity prevents her from putting to use her leadership qualities. Development work in Naya Khola is still slow paced. An effort to gain benefits from a lift-irrigation facility set up by Seva Mandir has proved to be a non-starter as the villagers have not been able to channel water to their village. Plans for setting up a joint forest management project has finally got a green signal from the government only this year and work on it will begin soon.

This state of affairs has led to an apparent lack of sympathy for Savita Devi's leadership role within the community. For the villagers, mere talk on the importance of gender equality and forest protection is not enough. They want to see more by way of development work. Bacchulal Pargi put it this way: 'We are always behind our women. Neither sex is more important than the other. Both have to support each other. We have also done a lot of work to protect our forest. Now Seva Mandir should help us earn some extra income.'

Her peers are initially reluctant to talk, but they do realize the vital difference that makes Savita Devi stand apart from other village women. 'She is educated and we are not. That's the difference,' they admit. 'But we are happy to support her from behind. We go outside our village for meetings as well. But we go along with her. She gives us confidence,' says Sohini Bai, president of the women's self-help group. Though grudging in her praise, she reveals no rancour towards Savita Devi. Sohini Bai is quick to add that all men and women in the village worked together to save the jungle. Nobody did it alone. 'If one person has got an award for it, it makes us feel as if all of us have got it because all of us worked together,' she says. Perhaps this is a measure of Savita Devi's qualities of leadership. The credit for this goes in part to Heeralal as well.

Heeralal who has been living with the envy that his wife's success in the public arena arouses among people takes it all in his stride. 'Men make fun of me and say their women are worth lakhs and they do not send them away alone,' he says with a smile. Savita Devi too is quick with her repartee: 'We

tell them fine, you keep your women at home and protect the lakhs.' Heeralal, a reflective and magnanimous man, does not betray any trace of embarrassment when he says: 'I don't mind doing the housework. I'm very happy that Savita Devi has come so far ahead in life, and I would like her to do more. I don't have any personal ambition.'

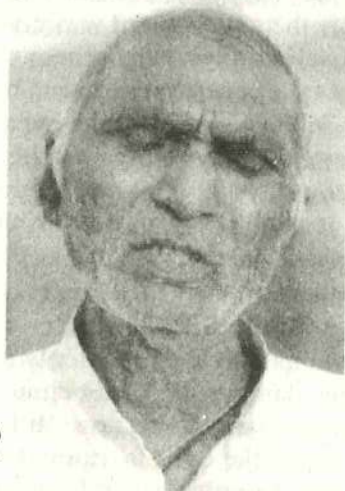
For people in the village, a good conjugal relationship is often measured by how many times the wife goes to her mother's place after a family quarrel. Ask Savita Devi how many times she has abandoned her husband for her mother and she says: 'Not once.' The understanding and empathy between the two is quite apparent. 'My husband has always encouraged me. Otherwise, I would never have been able to achieve what I have so far. He does more of the housework than I do and I'm more involved with working for the poor,' she adds. Both husband and wife start their day at 5 in the morning. 'We share and help each other in our work. When I work in the field, he doubles up for me as a health worker.' However, the couple has also gone through a lot of personal grief. Savita Devi lost three of her children within a few months of their birth. 'Today after a lot of prayers I'm the mother of a 10-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter,' she says.

Meanwhile, economic compulsions are also forcing Savita Devi to look at the practical side of community work. Her proposal to run a full time Seva Mandir *balwadi* centre in Naya Khola has not yet been approved. So she has now joined another NGO called Swach Pariyojna, drawing a monthly salary of Rs. 400. Though no longer formally associated with Seva Mandir, Savita Devi is a member of the Van Uthan Sangh, a federation of forest protection committees. The Sangh has only three women volunteers — Kanku, Hansa, and Savita Devi.

Today even as the people of Naya Khola appear a little disappointed with the slow pace of life and eagerly look forward to something new and exciting to happen in their village, change agents like Savita Devi still hold out some hope. Yet in the years to come, patience will have to be the watchword for Savita Devi. And that alone will put to the test her leadership abilities.

Upholding Values

Gomji Salvi



Gomji Salvi

Gomji Salvi, popularly known as Gomji *bhai* to all, is still an active social worker even in his sixties. A Seva Mandir *van pal* in Bhandra village in Kherwada *tehsil*, nearly 95 km. from Udaipur, he is as enthusiastic about work today as he was when he started nearly 16 years ago. It is not only because Seva Mandir ensures him a steady source of income, but, as he says, 'I would like to see my village prosper.'

'I don't treat this as a job since monetarily I haven't gained much. I want to work to improve the lives of the people of my village,' he adds.

Being the only child of his parents did not help Gomji Salvi have a particularly easy childhood. He studied for a year in a government school, 6 km. away, till Bhandra got its own school. 'I would walk 12 km. every day. Finally, when they opened a school in Bhandra, I studied in my village up to the 5th standard,' he says.

One day, influenced by friends and in the hope of finding better opportunities, Gomji *bhai* decided to try his luck in the city. He migrated to Udaipur and started learning the art of sewing. At that time the government was giving away sewing machines under a self-employment scheme, and Gomji *bhai* thought it was a good opportunity to start his own business. Traditionally the Salvis belong to the weaver community. 'Even my father used to weave cloth with his hands. But with the changing times, weaving went out of fashion. There isn't any income from it now,' he says.

However, Gomji couldn't make Udaipur his home for long. After packing his sewing machine he went back to his village to continue being a tailor. 'I did it for five years and earned around Rs. 2 or Rs. 3 per day.' As the only child, Gomji *bhai* had to shoulder the family's responsibilities. And while he's not sure when he got married, he says: 'It happened when I was pretty young. It was quite a normal affair.' Marriage forced Gomji to give up tailoring and instead to take to the family's five *bighas* of farm land. 'First, I got a well dug on our land. Then, apart from maize, I started growing wheat as well.' During this time, he also tried his hand at earning some side income by doing odd jobs such as maintaining the attendance register during local road construction work.

But this was not to last for long. In 1986 Seva Mandir organized a workshop to train people in treating diseased cattle. This was to be the beginning of a new journey in Gomji *bhai's* life. 'I just happened to go there by chance,' he says. But sometimes luck can play a key role in changing the course of one's life. And Seva Mandir had shown the residents of

Bhanda a new path to hope. 'Seva Mandir introduced many new concepts in our lives. One such concept was sitting together and discussing livelihood issues,' he says. However, the villagers needed a binding force to come together. That was when Seva Mandir introduced them to the concept of the self-help group. It was through Gomji *bhai's* initiatives that a SHG was set up in the village. 'We decided to start one for both men and women. People had to deposit Rs. 5 every month and we met once a month to deposit that money. That also served as an excuse for all the villagers to meet. Seva Mandir also took this opportunity to introduce several other community initiatives to the villagers. We learnt about their adult literacy, plantation, and forestry missions. We would discuss all those initiatives,' he says enthusiastically. Sensing his zeal, Seva Mandir involved Gomji *bhai* in an informal capacity in its adult education centre. 'I taught people how to sign,' he says proudly. Soon Seva Mandir formally took him on board and he started working in its non-formal education centre with a monthly salary of Rs. 25. From there, he quickly moved on to becoming a health para-worker before finally landing the job of a *van pal* in 1989. That's what brought out the leader in him.

'That's also when my workload increased,' he says, not making it sound as if he's complaining. Meanwhile, the SHG he had floated in Bhanda had become quite popular. Women from the neighbouring *phala* of Bhatki also wanted to start a SHG and get involved with planting trees. Gomji *bhai* willingly came forward to help them, thus creating for himself a base among the residents of Bhatki and achieving several mission objectives in the next few years.

'I first told them it wasn't so easy to get started. You had to first discuss the modalities, understand the job, and work as a team. They agreed and invited me to Bhatki,' Gomji *bhai* says. He used the same formula that had worked well for Bhanda, that is, he helped the women form a self-help group. This gave them a chance to meet and discuss common issues. Gomji *bhai* also had a knack for convincing people to plant trees, not because Seva Mandir or the forest department said

so, but because he believed that it would help change their lives for the better. He not only organized the women of Bhatki but also helped them realize the value of planting trees. His efforts did not go unnoticed. Seva Mandir sanctioned a proposal by 37 women from this SHG to plant trees on their own land.

But Gomji *bhai's* sincerity in genuinely helping these women did not bear the fruit he would have liked to see. 'A lot of women misused the opportunity they got. They took the plants but did not fence them properly. A lot of the plants were eaten away by the cattle. Many more were simply fed to the cattle because the poor villagers were left with no choice during successive droughts,' he says with a hint of regret. It only goes to show that community participation is easier said than done and that traditional societies are often internally constrained from creating opportunities for their development.

Gomji *bhai*, however, was not one to give up easily. He continued helping people plant trees. 'Slowly, a change has come about. People no longer plant trees for short-term gains. They have started realizing the value of planting trees for long-term prosperity,' he says.

Change finally came to Bhatki in 1994 when he convinced the villagers to develop a 170-*bighas* pasture for common use. Luckily for them, there was not much resistance to removing encroachments from the land. 'We helped people realize that if they moved their encroachments and if we were to treat and develop this land, it would benefit one and all. But we took up the work in stages because people needed to realize the benefits they could derive through such community effort. Once they understood our mission, the encroachers moved out. There weren't many problems, which is rare,' he says.

And Bhatki's residents were mostly happy. They no longer had to scour far and wide for fodder. The locals found alternative employment. However, the people of Bhatki could not escape the nagging problems that one witnesses in most community initiatives. Neighbouring villagers from Thuria regularly trespassed upon the pasture to steal fuel wood. Most of them happened to be women who were often caught by

the guard. They, in turn, tried accusing the guard of molestation. 'We reported the matter to the police. We also spoke to the people of Thuria village. The police helped us and warned the people of Thuria to stop this practice,' Gomji *bhai* recollects.

Like most villages in India, sanitation is held in low priority in Bhatki where there were no toilets. That was when Gomji *bhai* mobilized around 37 women to build toilets outside their homes. Seva Mandir too pitched in with help, donating Rs. 800 per toilet.

Today, Gomji *bhai's* commitment to the welfare of Bhatki is evident. His observations about people are incisive and he does not betray any pretence of selling a 'success story'. This is apparent when he talks about the problems of the village development fund or the *gram vikas kosh* (GVK). 'The GVK was formed under my stewardship. We learnt the concept from Seva Mandir and decided that every villager working on developing the pasture would have to contribute at least 20-25 per cent of his wages to the GVK.' As a result, its GVK grew substantially with Rs. 88,325 in its kitty.

But the success with building the community purse soon led people to try and engineer a split among the GVK members, a number of whom felt there was no advantage in keeping the money in a GVK. 'They wanted to divide the money among themselves and close it down,' Gomji *bhai* says. It was then that he played a key role in preventing people from taking such a step. 'I held a number of meetings with the village people, explaining to them the advantages of a GVK. For example, I told them that the money that we were paying the guard for protecting the common pasture came out of that corpus. The kitty would also help them partially fund future development work.' Gomji *bhai* was also quick to inform Seva Mandir about the development so that they could intervene and help.

Hookaji, an old man from Bhatki, also brings to light the difficult task that people like Gomji *bhai* have to tackle. He suddenly jumps the gun without understanding the context and blurts out: 'We will not allow any more development in the pasture. In the name of development our cattle is being

made to suffer. There is hardly any grass because of the drought. Where will our cattle go to graze?' Hearing the older man rant, Gomji *bhai* only sighs and merely says: 'It'll take a lot more to explain to ignorant people the benefits that development work could get them.'

Today, as *van pal*, Gomji *bhai* earns Rs. 500 a month. But he has no complaints. 'I feel the best thing about working in Seva Mandir is that they treat people as equals and give everybody due respect. Of course, there's not enough money in the job, but it has made us aware of our rights and duties. This job has also helped me gain enormous confidence,' he says, showering loads of compliments on the organization that has helped him emerge a leader even at an age when most people are already retired.

Gomji *bhai* is a well-settled family man with four sons and a daughter. You climb a hilly track to reach his modest house, a few metres off the main road. Right now, his eldest son, Ramesh Chandra, who teaches in a government school, is helping finance the construction of a *pucca* house in place of his mud hut.

Gomji *bhai* was able to fulfill his burning desire to educate his three sons who are all well qualified, having graduated from the local college. While the youngest teaches at a private school, the second son has yet to find a stable job. 'I regret that I could not study as much as I wanted. So I was determined to get my children educated. Yet I'm disappointed that education has not helped them get good jobs. Only my elder son has a government job,' Gomji *bhai* says, expressing disillusionment with the present education system.

Being a teacher in a government school, Ramesh Chandra commands a lot of respect in the family and among the village people who still hold a government job in high regard. Articulate and willing to state his mind, Ramesh Chandra narrates an incident about his father: 'My father has never done anything for himself. He's always ready to take on any job for the welfare of others. Once the *sarpanch* of our village offered him an Indira Awas (you get Rs. 20,000 from the government to build a house. It is meant for those who have

no roof above their heads). But my father refused to take it and instead gave it to somebody who actually needed it. He gets very emotional at times. And I consider this a negative aspect of his personality.'

This trait could well be a negative aspect in the eyes of some people but it has helped Gomji *bhai* earn the respect of others and emerge a leader in his village. This is further substantiated when a Seva Mandir worker, Lalit Pandey, says that Gomji *bhai* is a highly respected community elder and is regularly invited to school functions. His mild manners have also helped him develop good contacts with government officials. And he has easy access to government records.

Gomji *bhai's* wife too has few complaints. 'He has taken good care of me and got me medicines whenever I've been unwell,' she says, quite gratefully.

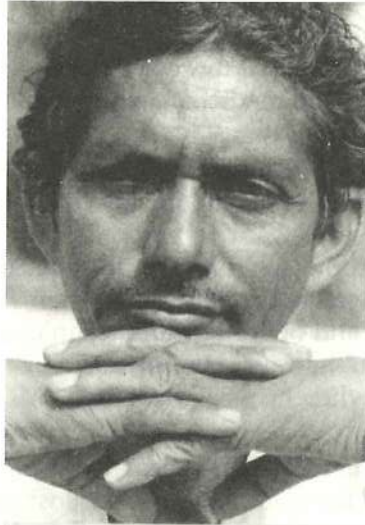
Today Gomji *bhai* may not be in the prime of his youth. But he is bright and optimistic about his future. And he dreams big for his people. 'I want to work to help people improve their farming. People are reluctant to take up manual labour and are more interested in improving their farms. They want bunds and wells and better farming techniques. I want to help them get all that,' he says. His selfless work for the villagers was recognized when he was given the U.M. Lodha Award in year 2000.

Political ambitions are also close to Gomji *bhai's* heart. He was a *ward panch* for over a decade, but lost the contest for the post of village *sarpanch* ten years ago. Scheduled tribe people dominate Bhandra, and Gomji *bhai* belongs to a scheduled caste. 'I desire to be a *sarpanch*, but can't easily find a chance. Government rules mainly allow people from the scheduled tribe to contest,' he says regretfully. But he is quick to hide his feelings. 'I've no regrets because even without being a *sarpanch*, I've been able to get development work done and I've never had to bribe government officials,' he states.

He will also be happy to pass on the baton to the next generation and has no problems in sharing his work. That only goes to show that Gomji *bhai* has travelled a long way to get over his insecurities and emerge a true leader.

Deep Commitment

Nanalal



Nanalal

Nanalal is the son of the village *mukhiya*. His relatively privileged background, however, did not help guarantee him an easy childhood. When he was about 10 or 12 years old, and enrolled at the village school, Nanalal, influenced by his friends, abandoned his studies and went away to Gujarat in search of greener pastures. But there he faced a hard life. He worked as a helper in a rich man's house, and after slogging for a year all he got was Rs. 60! Finally, better sense

prevailed, and faced with pressure from his parents Nanalal returned to his family in Katev village, about 90 km. from Udaipur, in Kherwada *tehsil*. The rugged and arid terrain of Katev makes for a beautiful landscape. The village is fairly large, with some 142 households of mostly impoverished *adivasi* families.

Back home, Nanalal tried his hand at odd jobs and even opened a provision store. But none of these options worked for him for very long.

But perhaps life and fate had bigger things in store for him, as Nanalal puts it. A fortuitous meeting with a Seva Mandir worker in his village opened the door to future opportunities for this tall, very soft-spoken, and not so talkative man. In 1995 Nanalal joined Seva Mandir as a *van pal* and very soon found himself leading from the front in matters of community decision making. But leadership did not come easily to Nanalal because, as is wont to happen, people do not easily trust others aspiring to positions of power. However, Seva Mandir's backing and his own family's dominant position in the village went in Nanalal's favour.

Nanalal soon launched a crusade for the rights of the villagers. One such struggle involved a fight to preserve Katev's common pasture land. 'I talked to the village people, and we decided to develop this land,' Nanalal says. However, they faced a major stumbling block. A mine owner, known as Khetan *saheb* to the villagers, an outsider, had illegally encroached upon the land. The mine owner had dug up the area to mine for soapstone, starting a long-drawn-out battle with the villagers.

The dispute peaked around 1998. 'We told the workers in the mine to stop work immediately. This was a common pasture for the village people, and we had decided not to allow them to invade our land,' Nanalal narrates. Khetan *saheb* did not belong to the village. 'Not that we would have allowed him even if he had belonged to our village,' he hastens to add.

Legally, too, the villagers stood on a strong wicket since they had all the records to prove their claim to the land. 'We

went to the *sarpanch* and the *patwari* for help. But as are the ways of the world, they did not come forward to help. Instead, the *patwari* told me, 'Why do you want to unnecessarily clash with such rich people? If they want, they can finish you'.'

But Nanalal was determined to fight to the finish. 'The ground belonged to us and an outsider was trying to benefit out of it. What's more, even the labourers they employed in the mine were outsiders. We weren't getting anything out of it. Day in and day out, trucks would come to the village and disturb our peace. There was talk that they were even planning to build a *pucca* house there. In fact, my father was the first to tell us that it was a common pasture land,' Nanalal says. 'Even worse, the *malba* was ruining the texture of our soil. That was very bad for agriculture,' he adds.

So Nanalal, himself a *van pal* by now, initiated talks with Seva Mandir to develop the pasture. Khetan *saheb* stopped digging for soapstone for a while. But he soon returned to stake his claim to the mine. 'The mine owner came to me several times. He even offered me a bribe. Since I was the *mukhiya's* son and had been spearheading all initiatives in the village, Khetan *saheb* even offered me a deal that if I smoothened the process for him he would make me the manager of the mine,' says Nanalal.

In doing so, Khetan *saheb* had underestimated the collective moral character and strength of the poor village folk, little realizing that not everybody could be bought over. 'I am a man of words. I did not want to backtrack from my commitments to the village people and Seva Mandir. I had already committed myself to developing the pasture land, and there was no question of going back on my word,' Nanalal states very emphatically. He was also quick to realize that short-term gains would get him only so much and no more. Nor could he afford to spoil his relationship with the villagers among whom he had grown up all these years.

Knowing fully well that there is no one more cunning and no one more knowledgeable in the ways of obstructing justice than a lowly village official, Nanalal spent several days going

back and forth between the offices of the *sarpanch* and the *patwari* to dig out the relevant records. He did not give up until he had the records in hand. 'The *sarpanch* and the *patwari* were not cooperating because of the pressure from the mine owner. Being a *mukhiya*, my father knew a lot about village common property. He also helped me with his advice, and the *sarpanch* and the *patwari* couldn't fool us.'

The dispute went on for nearly three years, during which time Nanalal played a pivotal role in motivating people into taking action. Khetan *saheb* tried every possible channel to weaken Nanalal in his resolve, even taking the help of the *sarpanch* and the *patwari*. 'But once I had the records in hand I was able to convince Seva Mandir to start work on the land. We informed the mine owner that we would start work on reconstructing the pasture land and that he should stay away.' By then all his attempts at trying to convince Nanalal to abandon the project had failed. 'As a last resort, Khetan *saheb* even threatened to get me killed if I did not cooperate with him,' he says. Realizing how unproductive and even dangerous it would be to create and nurture a sense of grievance on both sides, Nanalal tried handling the situation more diplomatically. Tackling Khetan *saheb* a little more tactfully, Nanalal told him that after having worked so hard at preparing the groundwork for this struggle, even if he were to withdraw now, the people of the village would not back down. Faced with the collective strength and determination of the village people, the mine owner realized the limits of his power, and was forced to retreat.

But the *sarpanch* was unhappy to see somebody else from the village take on the mantle of leadership. Unable to directly and openly prevent Nanalal from developing the pasture land, the *sarpanch* instead began plotting to destroy all the good work that had gone into this struggle. He was determined to extract his pound of flesh. 'A couple of times I had a fight with the *sarpanch*,' Nanalal says. The *sarpanch* wanted to create a road through the pasture land leading to the cremation ground. 'I refused to allow that, particularly after all that we had done to protect and nurture it, and plant trees.

How could I let that happen? All that had gone into treating the soil and planting the trees would have been destroyed. In any case, there was already a road to the cremation ground, and there was no reason for another road to be built right through the pasture land,' Nanalal argues.

Armed with the land records, Nanalal sought a meeting with the block development officer (BDO). On hearing his account, the BDO was convinced and did not allow the *sarpanch* to build a short cut to the cremation ground through the pasture. 'The *sarpanch* was just playing at creating mischief. He was looking for a way to destroy what we had accomplished so painstakingly. It's really tough protecting a piece of common property,' Nanalal observes. Nobody knows this better than Nanalal himself, a man who has been continuously grappling with such adverse and difficult circumstances.

Despite posting a guard, there are times when people from the neighbouring villages come and steal wood or cut grass from the pasture. 'I am constantly trying to tell people about the value of protecting trees. Today there is no rain because there are no trees. So we must understand the value of trees,' he says philosophically.

Meanwhile, a farmer from the village had also encroached on another patch of land within the pasture. 'He was refusing to move out. The *tehsildar* came and confirmed that the land did not belong to the farmer. So we broke the encroachment and completed the boundary wall. Even now, they keep bothering and threatening the guard once in a while. But all the people in the village are united in the matter of protecting their commons. The village committee is also strong. So the encroacher is unable to create much trouble,' Nanalal says.

Despite all that he has done for the community and his success in the public arena, Nanalal's family life is less satisfactory. He and his wife have no surviving children. His wife Meera, a painfully shy woman, prefers to remain silent on the issue, and becomes quite nervous when the topic is broached. Her first-born child died just a few days after birth. Nobody knows the reason. Since then she has had a spate of miscarriages. Nanalal has now adopted two of his brother

children, a boy and a girl. But that has probably not filled the emotional void in his life. Does Nanalal need a new woman? He isn't quite sure if a second wife would help. His 80-year-old father Rajeng confides: 'We got a woman for Nanalal on *nata*. But even she could not bear a child for him. We sent her back because my son's wife was also extremely unhappy with this other woman around. Ever since then Nanalal has ruled out a second marriage.' That probably explains Meera's silence on the matter. Nanalal himself has given it some thought. 'My wife does not want that I marry again. And I don't want to go against her wishes as it will only cause a lot of heartburn and unhappiness.'

The human obsession with begetting progeny often creates turmoil in one's family life. And Nanalal's experience is no exception. For now, however, he prefers to focus his attention and energy on his job. He is one person who doesn't consider his a regular job. 'You have to dream big to achieve something in life,' he says. And Nanalal certainly dreams big. 'I want to make my village lush and green, surrounded by tall trees. I have the strength and belief in myself that I can make this happen,' he says. The U. M. Lodha Award that he received in 2001 is perhaps the first stepping stone for him in the realization of this ambition.

Leadership by Diligence

Ishwarlal



Ishwarlal

Ishwarlal has been working relentlessly for seven years now as a *van sahayak* for Seva Mandir. You have to climb a hill to reach Umria in Jhadol block, nearly 70 km. from Udaipur city, where he stays with his large family comprising six children (of whom two are his brother's), his wife, mother, brother, and sister-in-law.

Ishwarlal's childhood passed in misery. In 1978, when he was in the 7th class at the village school, he fell seriously ill, but the doctors in Udaipur could not diagnose what was wrong. His father, an impoverished farmer, had a tough time raising funds for the treatment that cost the family Rs. 1,000

to Rs. 1,200 per month. The disease dragged on for three years until it was finally cured with local herbs. 'Till date nobody has a clue about what took me ill. Medicines from the local hospital didn't help. Instead, they made me feel even sicker. Finally, *jari buti* from the temple cured my disease,' says Ishwarlal.

The mysterious disease took another heavy toll on his life. Though he continued to drag on with his studies till the 10th standard all through the duration of his illness, he never quite managed to clear school. This lack of academic achievement was reason for early disappointment. Unlike most other villagers, Ishwarlal's parents had encouraged their children, four sons and three daughters, to study despite struggling to make both ends meet. Ishwarlal's father later died of cancer. Today, his 65-year-old mother, Marti Bai, has few regrets. She says that every rupee spent on her son's education has proved to be a good investment. 'I'm happy we took the pains to make him literate. Now we have a second income in the family. Ishwar's salary from Seva Mandir is helping us cope with the drought to some extent as there is hardly any yield from the land.' She is still not aware that Seva Mandir presented her son the U. M. Lodha Award in 2002 in recognition of his achievements in community leadership.

In 1982, when Seva Mandir started the first non-formal education centre in his village, Umria, Ishwarlal, then a recent dropout, found opportunity for work. One day, when the main tutor, Heeralal, went on a long leave, he stepped in to run the centre. Soon he was selected as tutor for another of Seva Mandir's non-formal centres in the neighbouring village of Makri. Classes at Makri, 3.5.km. away, were held in the evenings. Carrying a big torch, Ishwarlal walked to school every day only to return home close to midnight. 'I taught there for one and a half years. The villagers were totally illiterate, but were interested in basic education. The elders sat around listening as the children studied. Seva Mandir paid me Rs. 75 a month,' he reminisces.

During this period, Seva Mandir had taken up the task of grooming potential community leaders from amongst the

younger generation. Heeralal and Ishwarlal were among them. Heeralal, a quick learner, was soon absorbed into the organization's mainstream work. So space was created for Ishwarlal to test his leadership abilities. Ishwarlal, always a dedicated and honest worker, initially went about motivating villagers to take up sundry activities such as building a link road to the reservoir, running the non-formal education centre, and developing several *mini chaks* for meeting the fodder and fuel needs of the village. All these activities helped Ishwarlal carve out a distinct identity for himself in the community. A reservoir built in the 1990s on a 4 km.-long catchment area helped improve the quality of life in Umria, which has barely 90 households, a third of them surviving below the poverty line. Earlier, women used to walk 10 km. to fetch water, and the villagers had to stay without bathing for as long as a month. But now the reservoir, which took a year to build under Ishwarlal's supervision, will ensure a more reliable system of water supply to the villagers for the next fifty years or so.

Ishwarlal's initiatives in the neighbouring village of Badli Pada are particularly interesting. Badli Pada, located on undulating terrain, has 156 households, all of whose members belong to the scheduled tribes. For forty long years three powerful village families had usurped the common pasture, reaping huge agricultural incomes from private farming. The villagers had accepted this encroachment without protest, even as many among them survived on the margins. Then, some years ago, life in Badli Pada began to change when a soft-spoken tribal volunteer from Seva Mandir stepped in to evict the encroachers. Behind his soft exterior, 36-year-old Ishwarlal is a man of steely resolve, and it was he who helped things finally fall into place in Badli Pada.

Ishwarlal's face lights up as he narrates the story of how he worked relentlessly for seven years on the rather tricky and difficult job of freeing the pasture land of Badli Pada from the grip of the encroachers. Initially, when the trespassers refused to move out of the pasture, Ishwarlal instigated the villagers to set their cattle loose on the land, in the process

completely destroying the crops of the interlopers. The trespassing families registered a case against 20 village households. But the rest of the villagers got together and said that they were all responsible and not merely the 20 families that had been singled out.

Time and again the villagers destroyed the crops of the encroachers, but they always returned to farming. 'Then one day we decided to do *shramdan* and erected a boundary wall around the pasture, encircling the families living within,' says Ishwarlal. Seva Mandir also realized how keenly the villagers wanted to remove this encroachment. Soon the villagers started planting saplings. This was around the time that the younger members among the encroachers started moving out of their homes until only an old woman remained behind.

Ishwarlal says that this was a strategic move on the part of the encroachers. They assumed that nobody would dare to harm an old woman, while their claim to the land would remain protected. However, this strategy did not work according to plan. 'As fate would have it, one day the old woman came to the local *daru bhatti* and got drunk. The villagers, overwhelmed by the desire to restore their claim over the commons, took the opportunity to urge her to leave their property. An altercation followed. In the process, she got abusive and even pushed some of the children hanging around the place. The villagers tried to prevent her and somehow she fell and broke her leg,' Ishwarlal narrates. The old woman registered a complaint with the police against a few of the villagers. Angered by this move, the entire village got together and went to the police station. 'We demanded that all of us be arrested because no one person was responsible for the incident,' Ishwarlal says. Finally, the police did not act upon the old woman's charges, and she was forced to vacate the pasture.

Today, Ishwarlal shows no regret for what happened to the encroachers. He argues that divine justice was meted out to the encroachers for taking over land that rightfully belonged to the community.

For a mild-mannered person like Ishwarlal, that's a rather strong statement. Perhaps suffering years of personal

deprivation has brought out the rebel in him. But more of that later. 'I'm not scared. I always work for what the community desires. So I have no fears. I only show the way,' he says, revealing his extraordinary capability of uniting different people in the pursuit of one common objective. This is apparent when Ishwarlal talks about the value of carrying along people in undertaking any community work. He has been quick to realize that societies are mostly fragmented and not cohesive. So bringing together various individuals and groups can indeed be a tall order. 'Motivating people to work together holds the key to the success of any common work for the common good,' he observes. Today, Ishwarlal is responsible for Seva Mandir's work in protecting forests in eight *panchayats*; here he has been instrumental in developing seven pasture lands, setting up six forest protection committees, and two reservoirs.

At first reckoning, Ishwarlal seems a natural leader of his people. But his climb up the ladder has been long and arduous. Villagers in these parts do not easily trust one another. Poverty and deprivation force individuals to fend for themselves. Naturally, Ishwarlal too had to struggle against apathy and mistrust within his own community.

To his credit, Ishwarlal developed an ability to involve and enthuse people in collective action quite early in his career. When he mobilized thirty families from Umria to plant trees on their own land, this action created a few ripples. People feared that this could be a ploy by the government to take over their land, and they suspected that Seva Mandir was fronting for the government. 'I then assisted Seva Mandir in holding regular meetings in our village. We tried to impress upon the people that the government and Seva Mandir were actually thinking for our future and that nobody would take away their land. The Umria villagers were better educated. So bringing them around was not so difficult,' Ishwarlal says.

His success in evicting the encroachers from the village commons at Badli Pada was only the beginning of Ishwarlal's career as a leader, a role that he has enacted well so far. But to be successful as a multifaceted leader, he needs further

grooming. Unlike many other community leaders, Ishwarlal's first recorded success in social activism has been outside his own village. He has yet to create a stronghold in Umria where the traditional leadership has not yielded ground to the younger generation. The older generation still retains its leadership position. Seva Mandir provided Ishwarlal a public platform for his actions. Now he has to touch the hearts of his audience. Ishwarlal, however, counters this assertion and says that he has worked more in the neighbouring villages than in his own because there is hardly any forest protection work in his village. Umria has no designated common land.

His success in the field of development initiatives and community welfare has not, however, translated into significant material betterment in his private life. His role as a community leader notwithstanding, his family still faces a life of deprivation and want, surviving below the poverty line, with barely three *bighas* of land in Umria. Seva Mandir pays him Rs. 1,850 a month, while his brother, a part time Seva Mandir health para-worker, makes do with a monthly wage of Rs. 350. The family, like most others in the village, grows only one crop a year, and Ishwarlal constantly worries about securing his family's income.

This situation probably undermines his leadership to an extent. But Ishwarlal has both desire and ambition, a desire to provide a better future for his children and an ambition to achieve professional milestones in his life. His professional success may have been slow, but that is also an advantage as few see him as a selfish seeker in pursuit of personal goals. It's easier to trust such people. Ishwarlal does not rush into anything, yet his missionary zeal and never-say-die attitude remain his strong points. 'Even though I'm still struggling to make ends meet, I'm quite satisfied with my salary. In the future, I would like to work towards removing as many encroachments as possible by motivating people and taking them along with me,' he says sincerely.

His family too seems happy with the pace of events. Despite all the hardships that they have faced — including the drought, which has taken a heavy toll on the land, yielding half the crop

that it did earlier — they feel that life is better now than what it was ten years ago. 'In those days, there were no health or education facilities. Now we have both. Women in our village no longer have to walk miles to fetch water. God has been kind to us when we compare ourselves with some of the other villages,' says Marti Bai.

Minor disappointments apart, that's cause for cheer!

At Home in Principles

Pannalal



Pannalal

Pannalal was born into a family of landholders. His grandfather owned more than 15 *bighas* of land. But that was a long time ago. Over the years, drought and the division of property among the brothers robbed the family of their wealth. Today, his family is counted among those living below the poverty line. Pannalal, a member of a scheduled tribe, owns merely 1.5 *bighas* of land in his native village Dhala, 75

km. from Udaipur, in the Jhadol *tehsil*, where he lives with his four daughters, wife, and father.

Struggle began early in life for Pannalal. His father, Singraji, now 80, sold off the family's silver jewellery to educate his children. He even educated his daughter till the 10th standard. Today she runs an *anganwadi* centre, earning Rs. 3,000 a month. Pannalal was relatively unlucky. Some time around 1981 he was forced to abandon his studies after completing his 12th grade because of financial problems. 'I sat at home doing nothing for a year until I got a job in a textile loom near Udaipur,' he says. But that was not to last for long. He soon left the mill and returned to his village Dhala.

Unemployed and idle, Pannalal was frittering away his time at home when opportunity came knocking at his door once again. Kalu Lal, a *van pal* in Seva Mandir who also belonged to Dhala, helped him put in an application with Seva Mandir. However, Pannalal faced disappointment when his candidature was rejected. Finally, in 1993, Seva Mandir selected him as a *van sahayak* in the Oda zone.

With this commenced Pannalal's journey into the field of community development work. 'The Oda zone being a very interior and inaccessible area, it was a very difficult place to work in. I would go to Dhala only during holidays,' he recalls.

In 1994, when Seva Mandir started its adult education centre in Oda, Pannalal worked hard to contact and encourage people to join the centre. 'We were successful in motivating people and a lot of them came forward,' he says. While his first exposure to development work may not have helped him achieve the world, it did wonders for his confidence. 'That stint in Oda helped me gain confidence and I became much more articulate,' he says. Two years later, Pannalal was posted to the Bicchiwada zone as *van sahayak*. It was here that he got an opportunity to fully exploit his leadership potential. A lot of development activities were taking place in the zone. These included a joint forest management project, a lift-irrigation project, fencing of farm land, and watershed work at different locations. 'Looking at all of this, my interest in development work grew even more,' Pannalal says with a glint in his eyes.

Ever since then he has also been able to enjoy the comforts of home as his native village Dhala falls within the Bicchiwada zone. Dhala is almost an 8 km.- long drive along a bumpy dirt track off the main road in Jhadol *tehsil*.

Subsequently, he worked on two common lands in Amleta and Amiwada in Jhadol *tehsil*. In 1999, when local forest officials and the people of neighbouring Amiwada village ganged up to prevent development work on a piece of common land in Amleta, it was Pannalal who provided leadership. He worked in close coordination with the Van Uthan Sangh of Jhadol to remove unnecessary roadblocks. 'I kept the morale of the village people high. I would meet the forest department officials and the *patwari* to keep up the pressure,' he says. It's not surprising then that Pannalal, propelled by his enthusiasm, helped form seven forest protection committees in Jhadol *tehsil*.

Yet again, a person tried to encroach on some land in the Turgarh jungle by erecting a boundary wall with the help of a JCB machine. When Pannalal came to know about the incident, he immediately informed the forest department officials and had the machine seized. The owner and the workers were arrested and were fined Rs. 1,400. Pannalal's heroic efforts not only helped remove the encroachments, but also sent out a message to the community that forests needed to be protected and that no one should attempt to grab common land for personal gain.

Pannalal admits that being more educated and being associated with an organization like Seva Mandir has helped him gain a better negotiating ability. 'The common people look up to us for help. This gives us tremendous strength and also the urge to do something,' he says.

During the last few years he has worked relentlessly to increase the base of Seva Mandir. At that time, in the Bicchiwada zone, Seva Mandir was working only in the villages of Bada Bhilwada, Shyampura, Amod, and Amliya; apart from the people in these villages the organization had little contact with people from other areas. 'I held regular meetings and established contacts with some of the other villages and was able

to help Seva Mandir extend its area of intervention to villages like Amivada, Turgarh, Dhala, and Amleta,' he adds.

'People also started developing faith in our work and realized that what we were doing was ultimately for their own good. Moreover, it also helped them get employment,' Pannalal says.

However, his efforts at initiating development work in his own village of Dhala are yet to gather steam. Lack of cohesiveness among the people of Dhala is posing a real challenge to Pannalal in his organizational work, as he himself admits.

Dhala, located in a very dry region, is almost bereft of trees. Following the government's Aravali project in the early 1990s, there has been no further plantation work. 'I've made several attempts but getting the people of Dhala together is still a challenge,' Pannalal says quite frankly.

A watershed, a lift-irrigation site, a joint forest management site, and a site for a water reservoir were prepared, but these projects never took off the ground. Pannalal admits that the preparatory work for taking on these jobs was somewhat weak. Also, the lack of community cohesiveness was one of the main reasons why the projects never took off, he says. 'The people have yet to come together to form one village committee comprising members of all the three hamlets. Unless we are able to form a strong and capable village committee, taking along members of all the three hamlets, Seva Mandir will not sanction money. We do realize that this is a major problem,' he says.¹

However, what is significant is that Pannalal is a thinking person who is able to analyse his achievements and

¹ Pannalal openly admits that the people of one of the hamlets, Nicchla phala, comprising 35 households, are completely alienated from all community development initiatives. 'What is worse, they are being provoked by rival NGOs. During drought relief work, we had a sanction for a few wells. We decided to build one in this hamlet. But rival NGOs provoked these ignorant people to refuse our funds. The people of this hamlet also try and break the fencing created by us to graze their cattle on the common land,' Pannalal says.

shortcomings. His leadership qualities will be put to the test in the years to come when he tries to resolve the differences among people so that development work can start in Dhala. Seva Mandir seems to have full faith in his abilities. 'He is a quick learner. In the second JFM project in Bicchiwada, Pannalal played a vital role. Unlike other village leaders, there is not much opposition against him because he is recognized as a Seva Mandir worker rather than as a leader of his village. There is also less opposition against him as he has no political leanings,' observes Hemraj Bhatti, general-secretary of Seva Mandir.

Meanwhile, Pannalal struggles to sort out problems elsewhere. For the past one year, the people of Amliya have been encroaching on Turgarh land, and Pannalal is working with their forest protection committees to resolve the matter and remove these encroachments. What keeps him going? This is a difficult question to answer. But for Pannalal the appreciation of his peers and fellow villagers holds a lot of value. 'I was very happy when I received the U. M. Lodha Award in 2002. I distributed sweets among the people of my village to celebrate the achievement,' he says quite excitedly.

On the personal front, too, life has presented many challenges to Pannalal. In keeping with local customs, Pannalal, a father of four daughters, faces pressure to marry again so that a new wife may beget him a son. In most Indian villages, people still hold women directly responsible for not giving birth to a son. However, Pannalal's father, Singraji, now a widower, is non-committal on the matter. But he secretly desires a grandson and would like Pannalal to marry again. He's careful not to be overbearing though. 'I have done my duty. Now Pannalal's children are his headache,' he says. But he contradicts himself when he adds that if Pannalal had a son he would have ensured the child's education. 'Spending on girls is a bad investment because they go away,' says Singraji, forgetting for a moment that his own daughter, who earns Rs. 3,000, assists him financially as and when required.

However, Pannalal is firm in his views regarding marriage. 'I will not marry again just for having a son. I'm resigned to

having four daughters. People in the village keep provoking my father saying that there should be a male child to carry on the *vansh*. But how can I afford to increase my family with just 1.5 *bighas* of land and hardly any water? I have to educate my girls and prepare them for marriage as well. Besides, my wife is absolutely healthy, so why should I bring another woman? People of my community will not like it,' he says.

Pannalal's wife, Phulki Bai, is a strong woman herself. 'I do desire a son very strongly. So I haven't yet resorted to family planning methods. But I won't allow my husband to go in for a second marriage for the sake of a son. I will make all my daughters literate,' she says firmly. And for now, Pannalal seems to agree.

Blossoms in the dust

Narayan Lal Lakhara



Narayan Lal Lakhara

Narayan Lal Lakhara grew up watching his father carry sacks full of goods on the back of a donkey to eke out a living. That was several years ago. But Narayan Lal and his family haven't been able to wipe away the bitter memories of their father struggling to provide for a family of ten. 'Our family was the poorest in the village. My father would walk miles every day carrying goods for other people on a donkey's back,' Narayan Lal recalls. 'But despite the hardship he was determined to educate us,' he adds.

Narayan Lal and his four older brothers managed to study till the 8th grade. Even though Narayan was eager to study further, the nearest high school was 25 km. away. That was reason enough for Narayan to accompany one of his brothers to Ahmedabad in search of a living to help ease some of his father's burden. But Narayan lasted in Ahmedabad for all of six months. Soon he was back in his village Bikarni, nearly 100 km. from Udaipur city, in the Kotra block. 'I would keep falling sick, and so my brother decided to send me back home,' Narayan recalls.

But Narayan found little solace in Bikarni, inhabited by 175 households belonging to different castes. There were only two households from the Lakhara caste — Narayan's own and his uncle's. But the family's bangle business fetched them hardly any money. 'My father's elder brother's family was better off. Their bangle business was doing well. We specialized in *lak ki churi*, which finds buyers only during festivals. So for the rest of the year we were dependent on wage labour,' Narayan says.

Of course, Narayan's elder brother, working in an Ahmedabad mill, provided some financial assistance to their father. This helped him buy some land to add to the family's holding of 1.5 *bighas* and to build another *kuccha* house for his eldest son, who had just got married. Narayan is the youngest son.

Around this time, in 1986, Seva Mandir stepped into Bikarni to set up an adult education centre. 'We offered a room in my brother's new home to Seva Mandir on rent to run the centre,' Narayan recalls. That move also enthused him to join Seva Mandir. 'Lalit Mohan Gameti was posted in Bikarni at that time. I learnt about the organization from him. I expressed my interest in joining one of the *kendras*. But Lalit was soon transferred,' he says. Narayan got busy doing odd jobs. In 1987-88 a severe drought struck most of the region. Drought relief work was in progress. A road was being built as part of the relief work, and Narayan joined as assistant to the person in charge of maintaining the attendance register; he was paid a daily wage of Rs. 7. 'I would do odd jobs for him

like carrying food from his home to the work site. Though he belonged to the scheduled caste, I did not mind running errands for him because he was an old man,' he says. But life had better things in store. And soon enough, while working on that very road, the door of opportunity opened up for Narayan.

One day Narayan noticed a few people from Seva Mandir conducting a survey among the construction workers on that road. 'I was curious and asked them what they were up to. They said they were conducting a survey on adult education.' This got Narayan interested. He asked them whether he could volunteer in conducting some of the surveys. 'By then only one village was left to survey. They agreed to my request and gave me a form. I conducted the survey in the eleventh village (Mahula) on their behalf,' says Narayan excitedly. Then he expressed an interest in running some of the *kendras*. Sensing his enthusiasm for and interest in the job, the people from Seva Mandir asked him to attend an eight-day training camp for teachers. 'Bheru Lal Gharasia who had worked for one year in Seva Mandir and myself were asked to go to Kaya for training. They said that after the training programme they would select one of us to run the *kendras*. I was finally selected and was at first appointed for six months, after which I was made a permanent staff,' Narayan says with a smile.¹

Not long after, in 1995, when Seva Mandir made Kotra as one of its blocks, it promoted Narayan to the position of *van sahayak*. 'I was a total novice as far as the job of a *van sahayak* went. It took me one year to understand my role,' he says. He soon realized the importance of the task at hand. 'As a *van sahayak*, my job in helping people protect their common property is not only about protecting the environment and ensuring their livelihood. For us it is much more than that. It's a social issue where we are striving to help villagers protect the common land for the common good,' he adds. For village leaders like Narayan that could mean trying to restructure the

¹ He was actually appointed on a contract, but it is interesting to note here that in his mind this amounted to a permanent job.

existing power relations, a tall order by any means. In 1998 Narayan took on his first major community job at Kyara, around 2 km. from Bikarni, which had an 80-*bigha* plot of pasture land. Narayan helped the people realize the value of developing the pasture. Initially, there weren't any problems. However, trouble began in 2001 when an *adivasi* from the Gharasia community encroached on some portions of the pasture. People are still debating ways of throwing him out. 'Even the Gharasia *adivasis* are not with him. They have threatened to excommunicate him if he does not vacate the land. They are willing to give him some land elsewhere but are determined to throw him out of the pastureland,' says Narayan.

In the meantime, Narayan has also undertaken a number of similar initiatives. He has helped develop two more common pastures in Kyara and many more private pastures. However, Narayan has now decided to concentrate his attention solely on developing community pastures rather than private pastures. He has identified two such pastures where work has already begun. One is a 92-*bigha* pasture land in Dhanodhar, 15 km. from Bikarni, and the other is in Thep, a 209-*bigha* common pasture. Boundary walls are already being constructed around both the pastures. Luckily for Narayan, these pastures had not been encroached upon. And wherever they were, the people of the village had worked out a compromise.

Take, for example, the pasture in Thep, which originally measured 326 *bighas*. Many years ago, around five or six families had encroached on some portions of the land. In its wisdom, the local community decided to leave out that portion from the community holding. 'These families had settled here many years ago. They had no idea that it was a common land, and the encroachers had even started farming on that land, leaving only 209 *bighas* for the village,' Narayan says.

In the meantime, following his father's death, Narayan left Bikarni to join his mother who had earlier settled in a village called Juda along with her husband. Being the youngest child, it was incumbent upon Narayan to take care of his mother,

as is the local custom. Narayan's parents had shifted to Juda because they hoped that the bangle business would be better in this new place as there weren't any Lakhara families around. Narayan, however, continued to work in the Bikarni zone for Seva Mandir. In 2002 he was made the *ajivika karyakarta*.

Today Narayan seems well settled in life. All his brothers are married and working, and he lives in Juda with his wife, mother, and three children. Narayan also has 6 *bighas* of farm land on which he grows maize. He and his wife nurture a burning desire to send their children to an English-medium school. Says Saryu, Narayan's wife: 'My elder daughter who is in the 3rd standard travels alone nearly 10 km. by bus every day to school. But I'm not scared even though she's still a child. She has to study. We started sending her to this school because it was a private school where they taught English.' But unfortunately for them the school was recently taken over by the government, and it has now stopped teaching English. 'My daughter doesn't want to leave this school because she has grown comfortable here,' Saryu says. The family is, however, determined to send their son to a private school where English is taught. 'Knowing English makes a difference. Today had I been familiar with the English language my career would have progressed much faster even within my organization. I'm willing to take on all hardships for the sake of helping my child study in an English-medium school,' Narayan adds. The family has already made its plans. 'I'll send my son to Kotra next year. He will stay with my brother's family and will study in a private school where they also teach English,' he says.

Apart from dreaming about the future of his children, Narayan also nurses a bigger ambition for himself. After having worked for 15 years for Seva Mandir, he aims to reach the position of a zonal worker within the organization. He also nurtures political ambitions but regrets that he may never achieve them. 'Unfortunately in Kotra all reserved seats for the *panchayats* are for *adivasis*. So I can't get a chance. Kotra has no general seat,' he says.

Conversations with some residents of Bikarni help to explain the motivation behind Narayan's desire to play a bigger role in village development work. Says Murad Khan: 'Narayan's family has grown from being the poorest of the poor to helping in village development work. He has experienced poverty himself and is therefore sensitive and understanding about the needs of others. Because of him we got farm bunding done in our fields and our *anicut* (water reservoir) cemented. He would supervise the work on the *anicut* from morning to evening and wouldn't leave it to the labourers. Narayan listens to us and carries our voice forward.' Adds Kaniza Banu: 'Whatever I say for him will be very little. It's remarkable how they have grown from an extremely poor condition. Narayan is a local boy and we relate with him well. We look up to him and respect him a lot.'

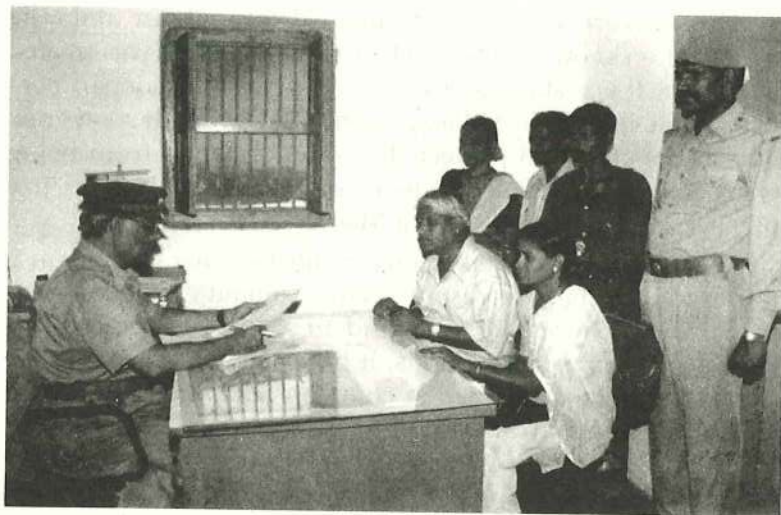
As for now, Narayan revels in this adulation. The U. M. Lodha Award, which he received in 2002, has made him even more determined to work harder. 'The award is in recognition of my work and has given me a lot of satisfaction. Ever since then I have decided to work even harder,' Narayan says.

Part II

**Collective Action for Social
Transformation**

Achieving Political Transformation

The Van Uthan Sangh



The Van Uthan Sangh

It was time for the rains. Forty families from Tundar left their village, as they did every year, to settle in the cool green forest area of neighbouring Bada Bhilwada. At this time of the year they left their homes to settle in this forest to grow crops, encroaching upon a 100-hectare open patch year after year and living off it till November.

Otherwise, life was routine and staid. For years the residents of Bada Bhilwada did not dare to protest against this encroachment by their neighbours for fear of provoking a

backlash. The families from Tundar were believed to wield a lot of political clout. They could easily bribe their way through the government system, and treated a *panchnama* from the forest department as a routine matter.

However, in the latter half of the 1990s things began to change for the people of Bada Bhilwada. By then, the village people in Jhadol block had become receptive to the idea of freeing the common lands from encroachments and claiming access through the existing entitlements to forest and pasture lands.

This concern was institutionalized through an umbrella organization known as the Van Uthan Sangh, which was created in 1997-98. It was started for liaising with the forest department to promote Joint Forest Management (JFM) work. It soon grew into a movement to protect the common lands from being encroached upon and to spearhead sustainable land use practices with the help of Seva Mandir.

The Sangh has now taken on a distinctive character because it tries to educate the forest protection committees on the need to gain legal access to land and to abjure the practice of encroaching on common lands. It has come to realize that the practice of encroachments on common lands was not only a source of conflict among the villagers but that it also compromises them in their relationship with the officials of the state. While working in a forest area, the forest department was not respecting the boundary of that area and was not bothered about protecting rights and ownership issues. As a result, villagers were tempted to encroach on lands, and this sparked off conflicts between the residents of the villages involved in the dispute.

Village leaders working on JFM projects or those involved with plantation work like a *van pal* or a *van sahayak* became members of the Sangh. Typically, the Sangh, which has 17 members, and is a network of 45 Forest Protection Committees (FPC), first conducts a meeting with the village *samuh* to discuss the implementation of a JFM project and also liaises with forest department officials and ministers. A membership

fee of Rs. 101 is charged. For the FPCs the first-time fee is Rs. 51, and thereafter the members are asked to contribute Rs. 21 every year.

The Van Uthan Sangh began its work by first removing the encroachments on common pasture or forest land made by its own members. Nanalal, the president of the Sangh, set a good example and paved the way for future action by first removing the encroachments that he himself had made on common lands in his village Shyampura. This act of statesmanship was highlighted and publicized by Seva Mandir, which attempted to link development work with the removal of encroachments. For example, in Shyampura the people were promised a lift-irrigation system if they removed the encroachments made on the common lands. Also, in Bada Bhilwada the watershed work was linked to the removal of encroachments. Such initiatives had a dual impact. Not only were the encroachments removed, but the land was also treated to increase its yield. This work helped the Sangh to build its reputation, enhance its leadership role, and publicize its efforts at trying to implement democratic and egalitarian principles in its own operations.

The Sangh's first major initiative—and also its first major success—was to negotiate with the state in removing the encroachments by the people of Tundar from the Bada Bhilwada forest area. The FPC with the help of the Van Uthan Sangh contested the illegal encroachments made by the residents of Tundar. Initially, the forest department was not forthcoming with any help. Moreover, the situation on the ground was much more complex since there is no actual demarcation of forest area boundaries. On the advice of the Sangh, the villagers went to Udaipur several times to plead their cause with the authorities. But this approach did not resolve matters. It was then left to the Sangh to launch a relentless lobbying campaign demanding that the forest department take suitable action. The Sangh officials met the deputy conservator of forests (DCF) as well as the chief conservator of forests (CF) several times, determined to leave no stone unturned in meeting their goal. Finally, bowing to

this pressure, the forest department came with a search party accompanied by around 50 villagers. They raided the area, destroyed the fields, and drove away the encroachers.

This is one of the many such efforts that the Sangh has made over the years along with village FPCs. At present it is fighting an encroacher, Babu Lal, in Turgarh village in Jhadol block. Babu Lal, a communist leader, has even built a check dam on the encroached land. The Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) has issued eviction orders but these seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Indeed, Pannalal, a Seva Mandir *van sahayak* in the area and also a Van Uthan Sangh member, even faced a threat to his life.

The Sangh admits its limitations, as encroachers are usually people with connections in the corridors of power. Such pressures are forcing the Sangh to adopt a go-slow approach, and they acknowledge the need to concentrate their attention on constructive work.

The Sangh leaders are also aware of the social and political dynamics that come into play in sensitive matters, as when they ask people to access land legally and remove encroachments from common property. 'People provoke the *adivasis* by saying that they are being deprived of land. But the fact of the matter is that hardly any of the *adivasis* are encroachers. It is mainly the rich,' says Nanalal, president of the Van Uthan Sangh. The truth of this statement is now becoming evident in Bada Bhilwada.

Seva Mandir felt that the patch of land vacated by the people of Tundar should be developed to prevent future encroachments. A proposal was sent to the DFO's office. But it gathered dust for nearly a year even though it was the same DFO who had helped remove the encroachments. Finally, in 2001, a sanction was granted to develop that area. But the people of Tundar have threatened dire consequences if the land is touched by anybody, and they are also refusing to even allow Seva Mandir to enter the area. Seva Mandir has even assured the people that it would help them develop their private lands and urged them to leave the common lands for the common good. But the people of Tundar are not willing to budge. They are known to have a lot of political clout, which

is probably giving them the strength to defy the official orders.

In the meantime, the village group of Bada Bhilwada also harbours its own grievances and misgivings. 'They feel it is Seva Mandir that is stalling the whole process. They are willing to compromise and leave 50 hectares out of the total 100 hectares for the Tundar encroachers. They want us to help them develop only the 50-hectare piece of land,' says Mamta Vardhan, a Seva Mandir staffer. The people's desperation arises from their frustration with having to deal with successive droughts in the last four years and their need for jobs. Even though the reasons behind the villagers' despair are understandable, for Seva Mandir to take this step would mean backtracking on the very principles that it is trying to espouse among the people. 'What we thought we had achieved by removing the encroachments seems to be undone by this attitude. Right now there is a stalemate, and we are trying to organize meetings with the people of Tundar and the rest of the village. Since the local forest department officials are not able to do anything, the Van Uthan Sangh plans to go to Jaipur soon to meet the chief conservator of forests. But in the process, the people are suffering,' says Mamta.

Despite the roadblocks they face, one of the major achievements of the Sangh has been to open channels of communication at all levels. Not only have they managed to develop a distinct identity for themselves in government circles but they have also established their place among the village people. The Sangh has been able to motivate the 45-odd village FPCs of the Jhadol block to spread the message that common property should be protected for the common good and that it should be made accessible to everybody in the village. So much so that people in villages like Madla, Gadla, and Adol in the Jhadol block were able to come together to fight encroachments with the help of the FPCs. This successful campaign has fuelled the pride and self-esteem of the Sangh members. Their proactive approach has also helped increase the pace at which JFM projects are implemented in the state. Says Nanalal: 'Today the forest department is much more

cooperative. Earlier, all of them used to be hand in glove with the encroachers. Because of our efforts there is now a lot of awareness as well. People have faith in us because they know we are doing something for the public good and not for individual benefit. We are not paid for this job. Our aim is to save the jungle.'

What's more, JFM projects that were earlier taken up in a piecemeal manner are now adopted in a more sustainable way. This year (2003) the government has sanctioned JFM work for 300 hectares at one go in the Jhadol block. 'This has been a big step forward. To a large extent, the credit for this goes to the efforts of the Sangh in setting up a dialogue, opening channels of communication that were largely non-existent, and setting up FPCs in villages. They have created a space for dialogue and cooperation not only with government officials but also amongst the people within the village,' admits Hemraj Bhatti, general secretary of Seva Mandir.

In recognition of all these efforts, the Van Uthan Sangh was given the U. M. Lodha Award in 2002. Today, the Sangh has taken on a leadership position and sees things differently. Although it is not a paid job and they have had to face successive droughts in the last several years, Sangh members remain enthusiastic about the project. To help it undertake its projects, the Sangh has mobilized a corpus of around Rs. 25,000, of which Rs. 10,000 came from the award money. Shantilal, the Sangh's secretary, says that they soon plan to double the corpus. Even though they have a tough road ahead full of roadblocks and hurdles, the members firmly believe in the importance of their mission. Says Hakar Chand, a member of the Sangh and at present the *sarpanch* of Kolyari: 'We believe in the cause. Moreover, the job may not give us money but it is giving us *izzat*, which to us is not small by any measure. We are working for that.'

Indeed, the Van Uthan Sangh has acquired a distinct identity of its own. It began as an organization conceived as part of Seva Mandir's Natural Resource Management programme whose aim was to coordinate activities with the forest department. Today it is a social movement with a much larger vision.

Trusteeship by the Poor

The Selu Committee



The Selu Committee

Selu, about 35 km. north-east of Udaipur city, in the Badgaon block, defies all stereotypical notions of a passive, tradition-bound, and all-inclusive Indian village, whose residents supposedly submit meekly to the diktats of an all-determining fate.

In fact, Selu represents a remarkable instance of what community cohesiveness can achieve for the residents of an otherwise nondescript village. Our story begins in 1970, when the local tribals known as the Gametis got together and created a group to foster village development.

The Gametis began by bringing health services to their hamlet. Then Seva Mandir stepped in, helping the villagers with afforestation. This was followed by a *balwadi* centre set up for the 22 children of the village.

'The Gametis first came together after they witnessed Seva Mandir's development initiatives in a neighbouring village,' says Pole Singh, a Rajput by caste, and now a member of the 184-strong Selu village group. This group began with just 20 *adivasis* who came together in the hope of gaining economic benefits through community action.

By 1990 the village group started to lay a deep foundation for the emergence of community leadership when it began discussing ways of developing the community pasture. Selu's four hamlets, comprising 208 households, is home to people from different castes. While the villagers live in clusters representing each caste grouping, the pasture land has been developed under the common ownership of all the hamlets.

However, making this happen hasn't been easy. As in the case of most other commons across the region, the villagers of Selu had to wage a two-year-long battle to free the pasture land from encroachers belonging to 22 upper-caste families. This was easier said than done. The *adivasis* were fully aware that they couldn't free the land on their own. The upper-caste encroachers made their task doubly difficult. So the group started inviting the residents of all the hamlets to regular meetings. 'It wasn't easy at all. We realized that we needed to take along other people belonging to different castes. For the first four months people from other hamlets never turned up for those meetings. But we did not give up and kept calling these meetings, impressing upon the people the need to come together to derive common benefits from the pasture land,' says Ambalal, a Gameti who is the treasurer of the Selu Committee as well as a health worker with Seva Mandir.

'The encroachers and the *patwari* were hand in glove. So the *patwari* refused to visit the area and mark it for common use. He kept making excuses,' Ambalal says.

But soon enough their patience paid off. Slowly but steadily, people from other hamlets started trickling in at

these brainstorming sessions. The group members succeeded in convincing the villagers of the benefits of developing a common pasture. In fact, so powerful was the impact of these meetings that the group was able to mobilize the villagers into undertaking collective action, cutting across caste barriers, for the common good of all. The group gradually emerged stronger than before not only in the number of its members, but also in its inherent cohesiveness and unity. Finally, the two-year-long debate seemed worth the wait when the collective pressure exerted by the villagers became too much for the encroachers to handle. 'The *patwari* was forced to come. The encroachers too realized that they had been alienated,' Ambalal says.

'It's interesting that the *adivasis*, who are considered the most backward, were the foot soldiers who brought the higher castes within the fold of community action. Earlier, we never even allowed them to sit with us,' Pole Singh says.

How did this happen?

The *adivasis* were quick to realize that it would be impossible for them to develop a common pasture without the support of the other castes in the village. So they ventured out to solicit support, first from people who faced no encroachments, mainly from the Lohar and the Dangi castes. The *adivasis* took great pains to help people understand the importance of developing the pasture and the benefits that they would all get. 'The villagers realized that joint ownership of the pasture was a crucial precondition before they could hope to derive any benefits from it. They were also able to comprehend that if they did not work together and develop it, the more influential people would capture the common land,' says Narayan Lal Ameta, the block coordinator of Badgaon. Social pressure was also put on the encroachers. 'The Patels put pressure on the encroachers from their community, and likewise the *adivasis* put pressure on other *adivasis*,' Narayan Lal adds.

Then came the drought, and the pressure on the people to seek other avenues of employment increased. A job to develop the pasture came at the right time for the villagers and

provided an opportunity for them to earn extra wages. Says Valu Ram, a member of the village group and also a Seva Mandir para-worker: 'These were difficult times. Initially some of the people from the other castes came together to partake of the benefits of development work, as this gave them employment. And with it caste loyalties became secondary. Today, we all sit together at every community meeting. We also eat together at any community gathering where every family contributes.' But that's only a good beginning. Valu Ram hastens to add: 'People belonging to different castes still maintain the divide when it comes to eating at each other's homes.'

By 1993, inspired by the goal of community welfare, the villagers came together to start plantation work on the 46-hectare pasture, which by then had been highly degraded and stripped of trees. The Selu group, which had by now grown to include 184 members, set up a core committee comprising nine members, three of them women, drawn from different castes including the Gametis, the Patels, and the Lohars. Ever since then, a great deal of natural regeneration of plant varieties has taken place on the pasture. Today, apart from the 5,500 bamboo plants that have come up, nearly 11,000 plants have been regenerated. The villagers earn nearly Rs. 35,000 each year from the sale of fodder alone.

Efforts at ensuring social equity and democratic norms did not end merely with developing the pasture. The village group is now trying to ensure that the fruits of their labour are distributed in right measure. 'People from all the hamlets gather on a fixed day to cut grass. Every family is entitled to send one representative who can cut as much as he or she can on that particular day. And based on the income, a certain amount is contributed by each family to the *gram kosh*,' says Valu Ram.

This ability to negotiate their own livelihood has given the villagers a new strength and confidence, helping them give shape to new political alignments. During the 1999 *panchayat* elections, the people of Selu joined hands with the neighbouring village of Jhalon ka Guda to create a common platform where

they could bargain with the candidates on the basis of their needs. The group created an agenda for local development and selected the candidate on the basis of his or her ability to fulfill this agenda. Money and muscle power clearly did not help because the people had come together and realized the power of their own strength as a united pressure group. Soon enough, the new *panchayat* fell in line, and started work on a link road between Selu and Jhalon ka Guda as part of its drought relief initiative.

Selu is fast moving towards being an economically self-sufficient village. Nearly 60 families in the village are today able to grow two crops with the help of lift irrigation. The *pucca* channel line constructed by Seva Mandir for irrigation seems to have made all the difference. Not only did it help in improving the yield by ensuring a good flow of water, but it also helped farmers grow a cash crop. So much so that today the people of Selu cultivate cash crops in all the three growing seasons. The income of these families has increased dramatically. Selu supplies two quintals of milk to Udaipur daily. A truck from the Udaipur *mandi* also comes to pick up vegetables from this village. 'What Seva Mandir has succeeded in doing here is help people manage their water in a better way,' says Narayan Lal Ameta.

Seva Mandir is working to make sure that this development is not lopsided. Narayan Lal explains how. The Patels being part of the agricultural class have benefited the most. But it is the *adivasis* from the Gameti community who have made a major transitional change in terms of their income pattern. A community which was earlier largely dependent on wage labour has been able to graduate to the status of an agricultural class. To further help the development of agriculture in the village, a well is being dug from where water will be lifted to the Gameti community. A lift is also being planned to help another 22 families. For the remaining families a water-harvesting structure is in the offing. Some of the other castes, like the Gayri who belong to the community of sheep breeders, have also gained from the pasture as it helps them get a good quantity of fodder for their animals. As a result, their

standard of living has also improved. As for the Lohars (about 8-10 families reside in Selu), they have not been able to derive any direct benefits from the development of either the pasture or the agricultural land, as they are mainly skilled labourers.

The all-round development is also visible in the village's surroundings, reflected in its many concrete houses. 'Today all the village children go to school. People are much more aware of their circumstances and needs. So life is much better now,' says Valu Ram. The village institutions too have grown as a result of the development initiatives. The *gram kosh* has Rs. 1.12 lakh in deposits. The group maintains another Rs. 91,000 as a fixed deposit. Their community bonding and welfare initiatives won the people of Selu the U. M. Lodha Award for 2000. With it came a cash prize of Rs. 10,000.

Yet the residents of Selu still need to strengthen one weak link in their development chain. And that lies in the empowerment of their womenfolk. The committee's three women members seem to be mere figureheads, evidently appointed to balance the gender divide in terms of numbers. 'I have been attending the committee meetings for the past two years, but I don't do anything. I'm just present at these meetings,' whispers Dhapuri Bai, embarrassed to raise her voice in the presence of men.

Bamri Bai, another woman member of the committee, is at first hesitant to talk. When coaxed by the men, she reluctantly acknowledges being the president of the women's self-help groups of Selu. 'I organize meetings of the women's SHGs of which we have two in the village. One is for the families living below the poverty line where every member contributes Rs. 20 a month. The other is for the better-off people who contribute Rs. 50 a month.' Then she quickly adds that she can't maintain the accounts of the SHGs. 'I'm an illiterate. Valu Ram takes care of all financial work.'

Be that as it may, in Rajasthan's highly patriarchal society, the mere presence of women and their participation in organizing meetings is no mean achievement. Literacy among the younger generation will probably further tilt the balance in favour of women in the coming years.

Denying Power Space

Bada Bhilwada Group



Bada Bhilwada Group

Some 77 km. from Udaipur, amidst the dry and barren landscape of Jhadol *tehsil*, Bada Bhilwada, shrouded in greenery, appears like a whiff of fresh air. You take a small dirt track off the main road to reach this village of 172 households, among the first to witness the dawn of change through several development initiatives in this district.

Most of Bada Bhilwada's residents belong to a community of scheduled tribes. In 1982 Seva Mandir initiated development work in the village with an adult education centre. The centre ran for seven years, teaching the locals more than what the textbooks said. 'Seva Mandir educated us on the need to

save our forests to improve our livelihood. They helped us plant trees. It was then that we started calling meetings. People from all the five hamlets that make up Bada Bhilwada came together to meet twice a month where Seva Mandir would educate us about forest conservation,' recalls Roopdas, almost 70 years old, who was the group leader of the village committee when Seva Mandir stepped in.

The group mobilized the collective strength of the villagers to start a joint forest management project with help from Seva Mandir. That was in 1994-95. And with it, began a series of initiatives that people took to with zeal.

At the centre of all these initiatives were Dhurilal, an energetic and fiery village leader who was then a Seva Mandir *van pal*, Bhimdas, a quiet introvert who was the president of the forest protection committee, and Roopdas, the eldest of the lot.

Soon these leaders acquired a new status in their village because they could bring a steady flow of economic benefits to the villagers. The government and Seva Mandir joined hands to invest nearly Rs. 5 lakh in Bada Bhilwada to protect the forest. In all, thousands of saplings were planted on 250 hectares of land. Seva Mandir also invested a little over Rs. 12 lakh to create a watershed over a 315-hectare area, bringing fertility to the agricultural land, says Roopdas. What's more, the development initiatives gave jobs to the villagers, adding to their traditional sources of income. Alongside the big projects, smaller initiatives like digging wells and farm bunding were taken up simultaneously.

The result: the jungle, which was gone fifty years ago, started to regenerate itself. 'Now you can see trees all around. In fact, in 1997-98 we grew grass worth Rs. 40,000 to Rs. 50,000. We no longer have to walk miles to fetch fuel wood. Unfortunately, the drought of the past two years has affected the growth. And in 2001 we did not get enough fodder,' Roopdas says.

The village leaders were also able to motivate community action to protect what they had created. 'Whenever the fencing breaks we do *shramdan* and set up a new fence. There

are two guards to protect the forest area, each earning Rs. 600 a month,' Roopdas says, while the others nod in agreement. Today Bada Bhilwada's village kitty is also quite fat. Thanks to all the development work, the *gram kosh* has swelled to around Rs. 2.77 lakh. The village committee also has three fixed deposits.

The coming together of all the five hamlets in harnessing community action is indeed a major achievement, speaking volumes about the leadership qualities of the Bada Bhilwada village group. 'We took the initiatives and people cooperated with us because they were eager to reap economic benefits,' says Dhurilal. This also proves that communities are willing to come together to derive benefit from common economic good. Being relatively more educated also helped Dhurilal, Roopdas, and Bhimdas to take a lead role in creating opportunities for a common cause.

However, management gurus will tell you that it takes more than education for leaders to hold on to their position. The ability to manage and take people along is tough, and nobody has experienced the pitfalls more than Roopdas and Dhurilal. Small wonder, then, that both men—who actually helped bring about a change in their village—find themselves jobless today. Only Bhimdas survives in his position. His sobriety helped him emerge as a true leader, proving that protecting and nurturing the common wealth of the community can be a challenging task.

So what went wrong?

Walchand, 28, and now the president of the forest protection committee and part of the new leadership at Bada Bhilwada, lets you in on how leaders can go astray. 'Roopdas furnished false information and was thrown out. Instead of surveying the entire village, he would just visit some of the houses near his home and fill up the health survey report. He would then ask the villagers to say good things about his work if Seva Mandir workers from the block level enquired. I'm from the Bhuj *phala* and I don't recall Roopdas ever coming to my hamlet to check our health needs. He would only cater

to his own hamlet,' Walchand alleges. 'Dhurilal, too, was ungrateful. He squeezed out a lot of benefits from Seva Mandir but is now bad-mouthing the organization. He was intoxicated by his leadership role and started misbehaving with people, trying to dominate over us. But we were not scared of him. We couldn't survive had we been scared,' he says.

Roopdas worked with Seva Mandir for 11 years as a health worker. Today he is bitter that despite having done so much for the village, he has been ousted from all Seva Mandir work. He also denied all charges of producing false information. 'I've always been a good worker and false allegations are being leveled against me now. I used to earn only Rs. 500 a month, which was not enough. But they even stopped that and took away my job,' he complains. And then he threatens that he would have mobilized the villagers and blocked the Seva Mandir car from entering his village had it not been on an assignment to profile his achievements.

'We are the main people in this village. We know everything here and have worked for its development. If you remove the driver and conductor of a bus, you can't make it run. That's what has happened in our village,' adds Dhurilal, ever smiling and reverential. His every sentence is accompanied by a bow and a salute.

Referring to the founder of Seva Mandir, Mr Mohan Singh Mehta, Roopdas says: 'Bhai Saab was indeed a nice person.' So he can hardly afford to hold a grudge against Seva Mandir with whom he has nurtured a long-standing relationship since 1982. 'Dhurilal and I brought Seva Mandir to this village. We helped it build a rapport with our people. We have done so much work in our village and proved our worth through our work. But in the end, Seva Mandir dropped us like hot potatoes,' he laments, before whining that Seva Mandir had better reinstate both Dhurilal and him. 'Or else the village committee would split and all the good work destroyed.'

That's when Dhurilal joins in. 'I was instrumental in building all the village institutions like the forest protection committee and the *gram vikas kosh*. I worked diligently during

both the joint forest management and the watershed projects. As a *van sahayak* I was paid Rs. 1,450. But they removed me and merely said the budget was over. If I have drunk my mother's milk (an expression typically used by people across the country to prove their worth before actually retaliating against a perceived threat or attack), I too will take my revenge,' Dhurilal says of his 18-year-long association with Seva Mandir. He also betrays his distrust of the educated classes when he says that Seva Mandir was created for the poor but the educated classes have taken over its management, killing its ideology. 'There are divisive forces within the organization,' he alleges. It is another matter that Seva Mandir is constantly forced to maintain a fine balancing act between professionals and the less educated para-workers. 'Bhai Saab had awarded me Rs. 51 for good work at the adult education centre and embraced me in blessing. And now I'm being treated shabbily,' he complains. Then he says that had they been bad at their work, the U. M. Lodha Award would not have come to them. The Bada Bhilwada Group was presented the U.M. Lodha Award along with a cash award of Rs. 10,000 in 2001 for their initiatives in community development.

In fact, so strong has been the foundation of community bonding in Bada Bhilwada that the group coheres despite the leadership struggle. Roopdas and Dhurilal's threats to disrupt Seva Mandir's development initiatives in Bada Bhilwada do not seem to worry the younger generation of leaders. They seem determined to block all efforts to fritter away the past achievements because of the squabbles. Even Seva Mandir is not particularly worried by these veiled threats. As Hemraj Bhatti, general-secretary of Seva Mandir, observes: 'Dhurilal has a dynamic personality with a lot of energy. He may be using these words now to pressure Seva Mandir into reinstating him. That's quite natural. But despite his periodic threats you cannot really take away the credit due to him.' Mr Bhatti acknowledges that Dhurilal was one of the key persons behind the development initiatives at Bada Bhilwada. He also has a good understanding of development work.

Dhurilal too nurses a soft spot for the organization despite

his many frustrations: 'I'll still say that Seva Mandir is a good organization, but its workers are bad. My understanding has developed through Seva Mandir. Thanks to it, today all children from our village go to school. There is a lot of awareness and understanding of development work here because of the exposure we got through the various projects.'

Unfortunately, collective action is not without its share of problems and bickering. The temptation to cross the fine line separating leadership and playing power politics is high, and the chances of nursing a larger-than-life image of oneself are immense. After all, leadership, like most success stories, is intoxicating. And Dhurilal and Roopdas are mere mortals after all.

The internal divide in Bada Bhilwada is forcing people to point fingers at each other. Worse still, this crack has appeared at a time when the villagers are facing rough weather on a different front. People from the nearby village of Tundar have been encroaching on parts of their forest land. And Roopdas and Dhurilal have been unhelpful. 'We are still fighting the encroachers, but the forest department is not helping us. They must have obviously been paid off,' allege the group members. The salary of the forest guards that was being borne by the *gram kosh* has also been stopped. 'They want Seva Mandir to take on the responsibility,' says Madhav Taylor, block coordinator of the Jhadol *tehsil*. 'This demand is unfair because, after all, it's their common property and they have to claim ownership over the land by paying for the guard,' he adds.

Two successive droughts have also raised the level of frustration among the villagers. 'There is no water in the dam. We normally have two crops. But this year we were able to grow only maize. Even then, whatever we grew was not enough to last the year,' Roopdas laments.

There is hope in the future, however. Bada Bhilwada's younger generation appears resolved to carry on with the good work done by their predecessors. 'We'll save our jungle at all costs. Our priority is to make the jungle green once again,' says Walchand. Bada Bhilwada has a youth group of 11 members, with a president, a secretary, and a treasurer. The group has yet to

take on any major initiative in the village. 'We met the forest ranger and the DFO of this area twice on the issue of removing encroachments. We conduct meetings where we also call elders like Dhurilal and Roopdas to discuss the problems of the village. But it's another matter that they never turn up. We called them thrice but each time they made some excuse or the other,' says Walchand. In the future, too, Walchand and his group plan to work to protect the forest by removing the encroachers. 'We'll get some employment in return,' he says, highlighting the practical side of development work.

Meanwhile, the third original leader, Bhimdas, remains committed to his work. He proves his maturity when he says: 'People may come and go; some may nurture misgivings. It's never possible to get one world view of things. And to my mind that is healthy. But the most important thing is that work should progress and move on.' Bhimdas, a *van pal* for the past four years, earns Rs. 250 a month. Being the son of a *mukhiya*, Bhimdas also represents the traditional leadership.

'I told Dhurilal and Roopdas to remain involved with development work, and if their work is good then Seva Mandir would retain them,' Bhimdas says. The hope that people like Bhimdas and the younger leaders provide vindicates the faith that Seva Mandir has placed in this group by giving them the award. There seems to be enough unity in the community to ward off challenges. And this is evident when Bhimdas says: 'A 100-hectare joint forest management project will soon start in Bada Bhilwada, and we plan to get Dhurilal involved with it.' This is a remarkable effort at maintaining community cohesiveness despite the power struggle within the group.

However, to put an end to the power struggle the group is planning to conduct an election to induct new members to the *gram kosh*. 'We are planning an election to revamp the *gram kosh* committee,' Walchand says. This singular move will not only help strengthen leadership positions either in favour or against the current leaders, but it will also once again display the inherent strength of the Bada Bhilwada group in their ability to adopt democratic means to resolve differences. At present there may be a stand-off, but there is enough evidence that the Bada Bhilwada community will survive the turbulence.

Small but not Subservient

The Kasya Group



The Kasya Group

The Rawat Meenas of Kasya take pride in their collective strength. Unlike most villages where Seva Mandir has been one of the main motivating forces in changing people's perceptions about their rights and duties, in Kasya the organization entered the lives of the villagers at a much later stage. Seva Mandir was not present in Kasya when its people were engaged in fighting long and dreary court cases against the might of their wealthy neighbours.

Kasya is a tiny village of just 24 families, about 45 km. from Udaipur city, in the Girwa block. It is sparsely populated, with houses spread out far and wide, a quiet and sleepy place

surrounded by hills. The village has only one Brahmin family, while the rest belong to the Rawat Meena caste.

The community bond among the Rawat Meenas was challenged 18 years ago, first by Madan Lal and then by Amba Lal, from the neighbouring Paramda village who encroached on portions of their 22-hectare common pasture land. Both Madan Lal and Amba Lal are rich landowners and belong to the Rav caste (bards of the Rawat Meenas of Kasya). 'Babruji, Tulsiram, and Prem Singh, who were the stalwarts of the village group, went to meet Madan Lal. But Madan Lal threw us out,' relates Shankar Lal, a member of the village committee. Not willing to give up, they met the *tehsildar* and even lodged a complaint at the nearby police station. 'Both the *thanedar* and the *tehsildar* came to the site,' Shankar Lal adds. But a solution eluded the villagers because of the long-standing nexus between the wealthy men and the corrupt government functionaries.

Unfortunately for Madan Lal and the officials, they had clearly underestimated the quiet resilience of the people of Kasya. The villagers decided to fight the case collectively. Each family in the village contributed to a common kitty to pay for the expenses towards fighting the case in the court of the subdivisional magistrate in Udaipur. Though the case dragged on for nearly six years, their unity and determination finally paid off. 'We won the case and got back our rights over the pasture. Winning the case was also a great morale booster for us,' Shankar Lal adds with a smile.

This instance of social cohesion and collective action is indeed rare. But what helped the villagers of Kasya fight off the encroachers in the courts seems to have been a combination of factors. Not only were they able to produce clean records, which clearly stated their claim over the land, but their strength also came from being a small, homogeneous, and closely-knit community whose members broadly enjoyed similar social and economic status.

Shankar Lal analyses the situation thus: 'There are revenue records that say it is a common pasture. They couldn't change that. That helped us win the cases.' However, mere records

could not have been the only reason for their success, considering how rules and laws can be easily subverted. On being coaxed further, Shankar Lal agrees: 'Yes, there are just 24 households in our village and all of us belong to the same caste. We also share more or less similar economic conditions. That has proved to be a great unifying factor. When you compare us to our neighbouring village, Paramda, they are not able to come together because of the caste and economic divide. They continue to face problems from people like Amba Lal and Madan Lal.'

The villagers of Kasya then realized the need to protect the pasture from being invaded again. They started taking turns to guard it. But that proved to be a temporary measure. In the early 1990s, it was Madan Lal's relative Amba Lal who encroached on the pasture once again. 'We again went to court (the SDM's court). The court case went on for two years. We won the case yet again, and this time Amba Lal was put behind bars for six months,' says Tulsi Ram, a senior member of Kasya village.

What is surprising is that the outcome of this legal battle did not serve as a lesson to other encroachers. Not long after this, Naval Singh, a Rajput from a neighbouring village, encroached on 5-6 *bighas* of the pasture land. 'Seva Mandir was not present in our village then. We took the *patwari* to the site. We paid him Rs. 200 to come to the site, whereas the actual fee was just around Rs. 50. All of us went there and added pressure,' says Phephi Bai, one of the more vocal women members of the village.

The villagers now realized the need to protect their pasture in a much more systematic manner. That was when they felt the need to involve Seva Mandir in helping them make the pasture more secure.

The villagers were also probably weary of fighting the protracted court cases. They felt that institutional backing and support would strengthen their legal position even further. Tulsi Ram and Prem Singh, who has since expired, would regularly go to Seva Mandir meetings in Sudon ka Guda village. They attended these for a year. In the late 1990s they were instrumental in convincing Seva Mandir to intervene in

Kasya. Seva Mandir started by floating a *gram kosh*. The *gram kosh* also helped them form a village group. A fee of Rs. 50 was charged per family. Prem Singh was elected as the president of the *gram kosh*. Tulsi Ram was a member.

With the *gram kosh* in place, the villagers requested Seva Mandir to help them develop the pasture. Once the necessary documents were in place, Seva Mandir agreed to help them. Each family contributed 10 per cent of their wages for the pasture development project to the *gram kosh*, irrespective of whether or not they worked on the pasture. 'We decided that whoever did not wish to pay would have to leave the village. But such a situation did not come up,' says Phephi Bai. People were convinced of the benefits that they would get in the future and were willing to contribute. The villagers erected a boundary wall, built check dams, and planted trees in the pasture. Around that time they also started a women's self-help group, with 29 members. Each of them contributed Rs. 10. Women like Phephi Bai took the lead in setting up the SHG.

Today, while 14 hectares of the pasture are closed because of the continuing years of drought, the villagers still allow open grazing in at least 7-8 hectares. However, the cutting of grass from the pasture and its distribution is a community event. Unlike earlier times when there was open grazing, grass is now cut on a specified day. Also, in order to maintain a healthy *gram kosh* each family contributes Rs. 25 to the common pool out of their income from selling the grass. 'We are now able to generate a better quantity of grass. Plants have also grown,' says Kannaji, a member of the village group. 'Earlier we had to constantly deal with encroachments. Now with the boundary wall in place, our headaches have been reduced. People like Amba Lal can't do much,' adds Babruji confidently.

Their community development activities and leadership initiatives notwithstanding, the people of Kasya are still being forced to be on their guard. 'Richer people from the neighbouring villages are literally waiting in the wings. Time and again they threaten us. While it may be true that some of the villages have not been able to maintain their pasture, we are determined not to allow open grazing. Had it not been for the unity among

us, we would never have been able to develop our pasture. People from other villages would have become our *maliks*,' says Nathu Singh, a senior member of the village group.

This strong sense of dignity and independence also probably helped the residents of Kasya cope with the successive droughts that this region has faced in the last few years. People were quick to adapt to alternate means of employment. 'Since the past four years there has hardly been any income from agriculture, forcing us to look at other options,' Shankar Lal says. They have learnt the technique of brick making, and now travel to a neighbouring village to make bricks. The villagers are paid Rs. 130 for every 1,000 bricks. 'On an average we are able to make around 500-700 bricks per day,' he says.

Though the community initiatives have not changed their lifestyle drastically, their occupational flexibility is helping them survive through these troubled times. Says Babruji: 'Everything is fine. Today girls are also going to school, thanks to the Rajiv Gandhi Pathshala. While we may not have been able to improve our economic condition because of the drought, our life has not deteriorated drastically unlike some other villages, where people are deep in debt. We were able to protect what we had created. Also, we did not take loans in the last two years. Moreover, as a community we are very flexible people. We were quick to adapt and took on menial labour like making bricks. We were not solely dependent on agriculture. This helped us survive despite having no income from agriculture.'

Their clear thinking and hard work finally paid off when Seva Mandir presented the people of Kasya the U. M. Lodha Award for 2002, among other recipients. 'The Rs. 10,000 award money which went into our *gram kosh* was highly welcome. We got back several times over what we had spent in the last few years on legal disputes and in travelling back and forth to the court, not to speak of our struggles and tension. We are very happy,' says Shankar Lal.

Kasya may be a nondescript village in a remote corner of Rajasthan, but that hasn't stopped its residents from exemplifying a unique and inspiring model of community cohesiveness and social unity.

Transcending Caste

The Karmala Group



The Karmala Group

The lush forest that turned into a barren landscape' is an oft-repeated statement that one gets to hear again and again in the Udaipur region of Rajasthan. Karmala, a village 120 km. from Udaipur, in the Kherwada *tehsil*, exemplifies the fundamental truth behind this statement. Its disappearing jungle had become part of the local folklore narrated by the village elders. But what one also gets to hear from them are stories testifying to the traditional unity among the people of the villages of Karmala, Ranavada, Reta, and Bhilwada that comprise the Karmala Group.

It is heartening to see the zeal with which the residents of these villages have tried to restore their lost wealth—a 26-*bighas* common pasture land situated in Karmala. It is little wonder then that the village group was presented the U. M. Lodha Award in 2001 for initiating efforts that have changed the lifestyle of the local people.

This traditional unity was rekindled way back in 1978 when Seva Mandir started an adult education centre for the local residents. They did this in the Ranavada and Reta *phalas*. Ranavada is home to the Gharasia Rajputs, while the residents of Reta are Brahmins and Patels. The poorer and smaller villages of Karmala belong to the Nut caste, and Bhilwada is home to *adivasis*. Despite these differences in their social and economic background, the people from all the four villages would regularly sit in at these meetings. This instance of a centuries-old social bond is indeed unique in caste-ridden Indian society. The genesis of this social unity may be traced to the festivals of Holi and Diwali that they celebrate together.

Today these villages have grown in number, and although they may not display the overt signs of social cohesiveness seen in the joint celebrations of festivals and other communal occasions, the roots of their unity nevertheless run deep. The adult education centre reflected this inherent strength of the villagers. It not only helped them gain literacy but it also exposed them to a world view with which they were largely unfamiliar. Seva Mandir helped them realize the value of nurturing and developing common resources for the common good.

What started as a tree plantation drive for individual farmers has, over time, taken deeper roots. People from all backgrounds have come together in pursuit of development work. In 1987-88 Karmala and its hamlets were reeling under a severe drought, and it was then that the villagers decided to work on developing the 26-*bighas* common pasture land. They did this despite many doubts and questions regarding its future protection, their own rights over the land, and even the role of the *panchayat*. While the pasture is located in Karmala, it was a common property used by all the residents of the four villages to graze their animals.

Says Kalu Singh, the treasurer of the *gram kosh* of the Karmala Group: 'At that time there was an acute shortage of grass. With help from Seva Mandir we developed this pasture. Despite fears and doubts among the people regarding the effectiveness of developing such a pasture, people from all the four *phalas* came together to participate in the work.' However, the work was not without its share of opposition. Two or three families had encroached upon the pasture. Fortunately for Karmala, and also because of the inherently close ties between the hamlets, the support of the *panchayat* was with the larger group. But this did not put instant pressure on the encroachers, who held their own and resisted eviction for quite some time. 'People who did open grazing opposed it for the first two years. But we had several meetings and finally they came around. At least a hundred families have benefited from the initiative,' says Kalu Singh.

Moreover, this experience gave the residents of the Karmala Group a taste of what people could achieve through collective action. Ever since then, nearly 5,500 plant species have been regenerated in this pasture. Today the villagers earn nearly Rs. 11,000 from just the sale of grass from the pasture as fodder. As a logical culmination of this initiative, the group set up a committee in 1999 comprising members from all the four villages and belonging to different castes.

Enthused by their initial success, the people are today busy developing yet another common pasture on a 100-*bigha* piece of land. However, before work starts on the land, the villagers will have to grapple with encroachers yet again and evict four families. Luckily, the villagers through their collective strength have already won more than half the battle. Three of the encroachers have already vacated the land. 'While three of them have agreed to move out, only one family is still being adamant. We are having meetings with the *tehsildar* and the *panchayat* members to resolve the issue. In fact, the *panchayat* has already given this family around 5 *bighas* outside the *panchayat* area, but it has encroached upon another 5 *bighas* of common land. If this family comes around, it's fine. Otherwise we will take legal action,' says Thoda Singh, president of the

gram kosh. The encroachers' upper caste status, members feel, has no bearing on the matter. 'They belong to the Gharasia Rajput caste. But people here do not see everything through a caste lens. In fact, when it comes to development work, people from all castes sit together and decide,' Thoda Singh adds.

That's the strength they have inherited and over time they have deepened and broadened it through collective action. 'The committee is very strong, and the government departments take us very seriously. The committee members are very aware and have undergone a number of training programmes through Seva Mandir. As a pressure group, it is indeed very effective,' states Thoda Singh, who has seen the evolution of the group from its inception.

Even though Karmala has different caste groups, with some more affluent than others, it is remarkable how the residents have overcome the caste barriers for the realization of the collective good. The Patels, for example, who live in Reta *phala* are the wealthiest. Most of the younger generation of Patels now live in Kuwait. As a result, the area is attracting money from abroad. This prosperity is also reflected in a change in the local lifestyle. Reta boasts of *pucca* houses, and the agricultural farms of the village have also improved. Yet when it comes to participating in collective action, the people of Reta are not far behind. Pannalal, the president of the committee, belongs to Reta *phala*. Says Jouwan Singh, a Rajput who lives in Ranavada *phala*: 'Developing common pasture lands is helping us a lot. When it comes to development work, we sit together in the same *jajum*.'

This unity and cohesiveness is evident in the functioning of the village institutions as well. All the four hamlets comprising 225 households have a combined *gram kosh*, to which each hamlet contributes from its share of the income earned from the selling of grass.

The history of Karmala and its association with Seva Mandir is indeed long, spanning more than three decades. This long innings is reflected in the attitudes and achievements of its people as well as in their leadership abilities to garner support for the development of their village.

Glossary

Adivasi Literally 'first/primal dweller'. Refers to the indigenous tribal or aboriginal population of India

Ajivika Karyakarta Livelihoods worker. As part of a restructuring exercise undertaken by Seva Mandir in 2002, the Van Sahayak (forestry assistant) was renamed the Ajivika Karyakarta.

Anganwadi A centre under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme for children under six years of age. Entrusted with nutritional care, pre-school education and health.

Anicut Water reservoir

Bai Woman, mother

Balwadi Pre-school nursery

Banjar Barren, fallow, unproductive

Behen(ji) Sister, term of respect for older or senior woman

Bhai Saab Term of respect used for Mohan Singh Mehta, founder of Seva Mandir

Bhai Brother

Bhajan Devotional song, hymn

Bigha A unit of land measurement. Five bighas equal one hectare.

Chabootra Platform for a public meeting, open space usually under a tree in the village centre

Dangi A caste, mostly of middle peasants

Daru bhatti Liquor shop

Forest Protection Committee A committee of village people setup to protect forests developed under the Joint Forest Management programme

Gameti A caste. Also a title of the village head

Gaon Village

Garasia One of the many tribal groups in Rajasthan. They are found largely in Kotra block, in the western part of Udaipur district, and in Sirohi district.

Gram Vikas Kosh A community foundation created by villagers with the help of Seva Mandir to raise resources for development purposes. Its purpose is also seen as generating social capital among the members of the Kosh and the village community at large.

Gupti Dagger

Izzat Honour, respect

Jajum Rug, used for public meetings

Jari buti Medicinal herbs, used in the indigenous system of medicine

Joint Forest Management Government programme under which the forest department and local villagers jointly protect and rehabilitate degraded forest lands. Villagers receive a share of the benefits from such collaborative efforts.

Kabbadi A game played between two or more teams

Kabir Panth A religious sect

Kada Bangle, bracelet

Kendra Non-formal education centre

Kesar Saffron

Kuccha Temporary, impermanent structure; see pucca

Lak ki churi Bangle made from lacquer

Lakhara Traditional buyer and seller of lacquer bangles

Lohar Ironsmith

Lok Adalat A village committee appointed to resolve disputes arising over property, land, or animals

Maharaj Literally 'great ruler/king'. Rural Rajput women respectfully address their husbands as Maharaj. It is also a title taken by feudal lords.

Mahavari Menstruation

Mahila Karyakarta Literally 'woman worker'. Term used to refer to a village-level female para-worker under Seva Mandir.

Malba Waste product and debris (say, from a mine)

Malik Master, owner

Mandi Wholesale market

Mini chak Land pooled by two to four farmers for the purpose of systematic land treatment under a Seva Mandir forestry scheme

Mukhiya Village headman

Nala Stream, channel, canal, drain

Nata A woman's relationship/marriage subsequent to her first marriage

Neta Leader, head

Panchayat Village council

Panchnama Form of settlement written up as a contract

Patwari Functionary of the revenue department who keeps land records at the village level

Phala Hamlet

Pradhan Literally 'head'. Head of a Block under the Panchayati Raj system

Pucca Cemented structure, hence more permanent. See kuccha

Purdah A veil used by women to cover their face as a sign of modesty

Pushkar Mela Annual cattle fair held at Pushkar, Rajasthan on Kartik Purnima (which is around the month of November); reputedly the largest such fair in the world

Rajiv Gandhi Pathshala Government primary school

Rashtrapita Literally 'father of the nation', a term of respect for Mahatma Gandhi

Rav A bard of the Rawat Meena community of Kasya village

Rawat Meena Although they are generally considered a

scheduled tribe, the Rawat Meenas believe themselves to be the descendents of Rajputs. Indeed, they are demanding official recognition as Rajputs.

Rebari A traditional camel-breeding community of Rajasthan
Registan Desert

Sahib A term of respect for one's social superior

Samaj Society/community

Samuh Village group created by Seva Mandir

Sarpanch Head of the village council

Shramdan Free or voluntary labour

Sipahi Guard, soldier

Swastha Sahayak Health worker

Talwar Sword

Tehsil Block, unit of local government under the Panchayati Raj system

Tehsildar A revenue department functionary who supervises the patwari

Thakur A Rajput landlord

Thanedar A police functionary

Up-Sarpanch Deputy head of the village council

Van Pal Forestry worker

Van Sahayak Forestry assistant who assists the zonal worker in forest protection work

Vansh Lineage

Ward Panch Person elected under the Panchayati Raj system who represents one ward. Typically 7 to 9 wards comprise a Panchayat, which is headed by the Sarpanch.



About the Project

This project of profiling grass-roots leaders engaged in community development work in Udaipur district, Rajasthan is part of a more comprehensive effort to document Seva Mandir's experiences in the area of rehabilitating degraded lands. A photo exhibition, a film, village case studies, the profiling of village leaders, and the holding of village-level and national-level consultations are all part of this comprehensive effort at documentation. The aim is to record the experiences of Seva Mandir and its involvement over two decades in development work and the lessons learnt in this process.

Dr Gisela Hayfa, director of German Technical Co-operation (GTZ), New Delhi, and Ashok Ray, programme officer at GTZ, provided Seva Mandir the intellectual space to crystallize such a project. We are most grateful to Dr Hayfa for her trust in the voluntary sector and her efforts to encourage a dialogue between those engaged in grass-roots work and those involved in the wider world of policy making. Without her help and encouragement, the profiles contained in this book would not have seen the light of day.

We are also grateful to the National Foundation for India, New Delhi. They recognized the value of this documentation project and assigned Nandita Roy, senior programme officer, NFI to the task of profiling the village leaders whose exemplary work has been recognized by Seva Mandir in the form of the

U.M. Lodha Awards. Nandita made numerous trips to the villages to meet and talk with all these people. She spoke to their family members, neighbours, and colleagues to get a full picture and deeper understanding of the activities and accomplishments of these community leaders. Nandita's openness to suggestions from Seva Mandir's field staff to improve her drafts is indeed praiseworthy. Although she is fairly new to the world of community development, her writings nevertheless reflect not only her talent but also her deep empathy for the people engaged in development work.

The work documented in the book has been aided by scores of donors who have supported Seva Mandir since its inception. It is important to mention the leading role played by Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED), and Canada India Village Aid (Civa), funding organizations from Holland, Germany and Canada respectively. Around 1988 they encouraged Seva Mandir to present a comprehensive picture of its development approach and funding needs and created a consortium of donors to underwrite the proposal. Their institutional support enabled Seva Mandir to adapt itself to the idea of civil society groups not only countervailing the state, but, also in creating capacities for development at the grass-roots level. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues, especially S.N. Bhise, head of the Natural Resource Department (NRD) at Seva Mandir, and Ashish Agarwal, part of the NRD team, for taking time out from their routine duties to make this project possible.

Neelima Khetan
Chief Executive
Seva Mandir
Udaipur



These profiles put together by Nandita Roy provide a vivid picture of the life worlds of villagers in a remote and barren part of Rajasthan. They show that qualities of true leadership are not confined to prominent places but may be found equally among simple and even marginalized people. Nandita is to be commended for the patience and care with which she has fulfilled a difficult but important task.

Prof. André Betèille

One of India's best known sociologists

These stories are powerful and inspiring and in some respects uncomfortable. The men and women chronicled in *The Waste Land* send a challenging message to each of us. None of them was authorized to do what they did. None of them blamed someone else for their problems. None of them waited for a savior to come along. Their actions tell us that leadership is not the prerogative of people in positions of power. With the willingness to learn the skill, and the courage to take the risks, you can exercise leadership wherever you sit in your organization or your community. It's up to you. Nandita Roy's book is must reading for anyone who believes in change, whoever you are.

Marty Linsky

Lecturer, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
Co-author, *Leadership on the Line*