



Rural Footprints

empowering women, enriching lives

—
Diinesh Kumble

Published by



સાહ્યકૃતિ • સાહ્યકર્તા • સાહ્યકર્તા





a tribute

weaving lives, narrating sagas

Saluting the spirit of the rural women of Gujarat who have stood up in the world and made a name for themselves...

...them who have taken heroic steps to come out of the social rules and norms of the patriarchal society and be the outcast, the rebel, the revolutionary messiah for the many who are looking for their saviours.

Rural Footprints is an interwoven medley of words and visuals meeting on mere hundred pages to arrest the changing reality of their lives and is a humble bow showcasing the humongous step they have taken to come together and bring about a momentous change in their livelihood. This book is just a modest act of paying homage to the undying spirit which has seized every opportunity that has come their way while making the most of it for the betterment of theirs and life around them.

"The empowered woman is powerful beyond measure and beautiful beyond description." – Steve Maraboli



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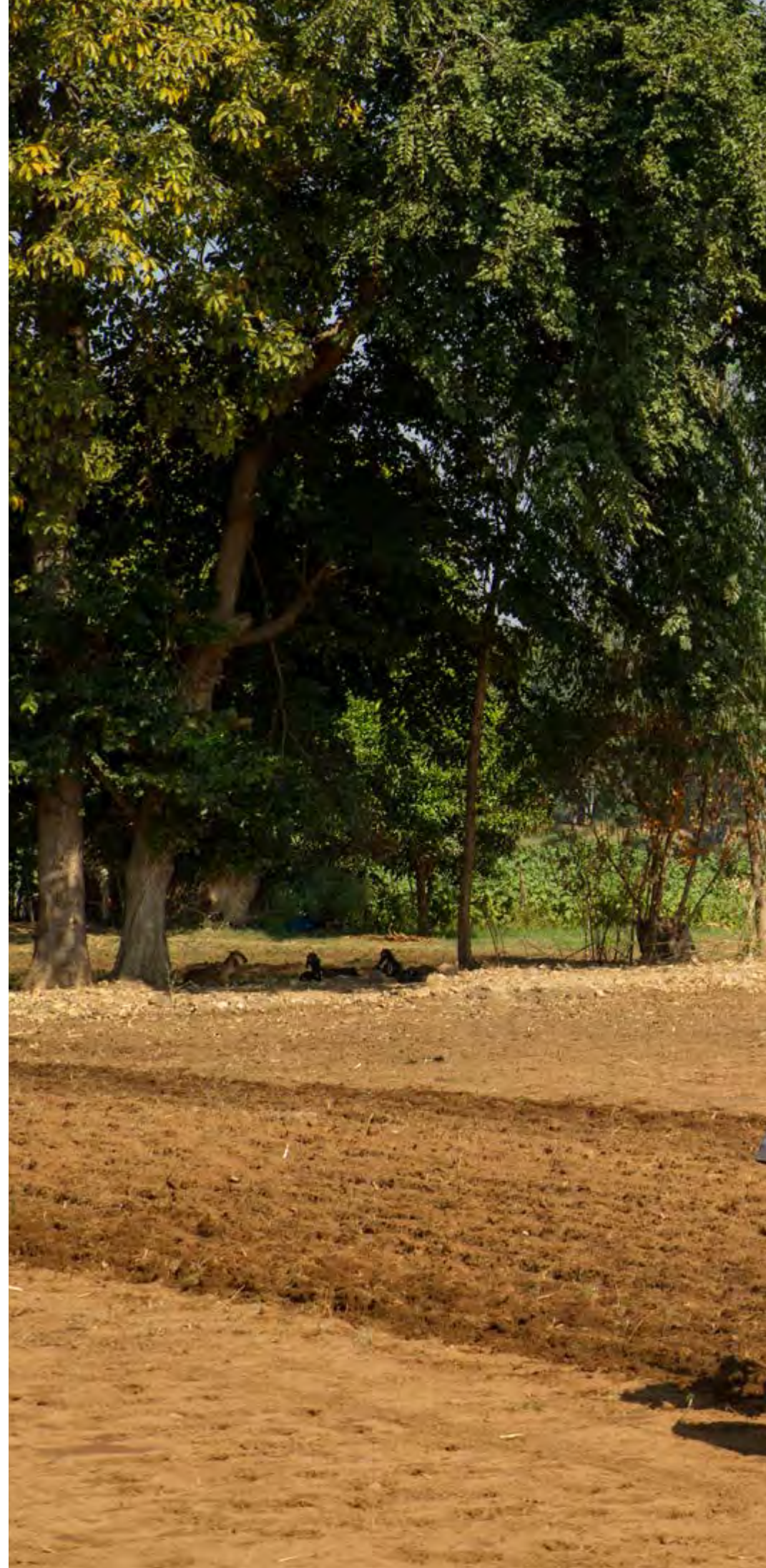
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Message



Smt. Anandiben Patel
Chief Minister of Gujarat

Being one of the most industrialized states of India, Gujarat has moved up the ladder of urbanization and modernisation at far greater speed than any other. Its endless journey from roots to wings is timeless with historical and cultural traditions glorifying the state. It's a place where heritage, archaeology, people, culture, and wildlife unite.

From the place known to be the hometown of Mahatma Gandhi, I am proud to be a medium to promote the beliefs and ideologies of the 'Father of the Nation' who completely believed in the idea that the rightful place of women, were next to men.

I am convinced that unless the women of today are not empowered, there shall be no spirit of leadership and enterprise among them. Greater and more significant roles need to be rested upon women's shoulders.

The way women are looked at and the mind-set of the society should be transformed in a manner such that women are seen as equal partners in growth with respect and dignity. Swami Vivekananda has rightly put forth stating that, "There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing".

The empowerment of women is a step-by-step process, which needs a radical and holistic approach. Let us envision a society where every aspect of a woman's life is taken care of with people's participation and effective implementation of schemes provided in healthcare, education or safety. One such programme is the "Mission Mangalam" started in year 2010.

Neither the government nor the people singlehandedly can amend the difficulties faced by the women of our society. It is this great initiative that is bridging the gap between the society and the government to come together and work towards the upliftment of women.

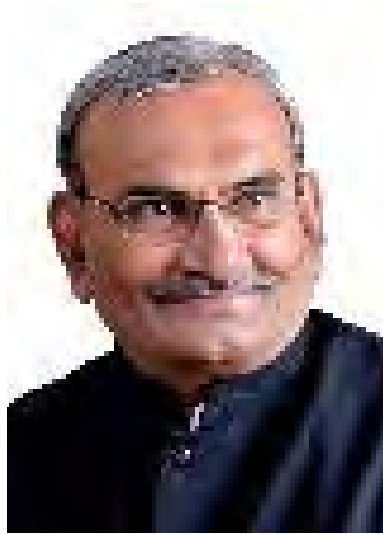
"Rural Footprints – Empowering Women, Enriching Lives" is a small step in this direction that documents the efforts put in by the Government and Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company (GLPC) to help bring about a change in the lives of the rural women.

I congratulate the Secretary & Commissioner, Rural Development Authority for undertaking the efforts to bring out this handy coffee table book and Shri. Diinesh Kumble for the valuable creation and wonderful work of photography.





Message



Shri. J. R. Kavadiya
Rural Development Minister

Many experiences and folklores have knit the essence of Gujarat into manuscripts, that will live long to show to the world a vibrant and rich way of life of the people of the land. Home to a cultural potpourri of art, beliefs, customs, traditions, institutions, inventions, language, technology and values, there are innumerable accounts to point out that Gujarat is state that has taken a stride beyond just the welfare and development in light of its populace.

Consciously as we try to perk up the welfare, we must not forget that empowering women also shares an imperative place on the same pulpit. Rural women in focus, have the potential to rise and contribute to increase the growth of the state.

I am very happy to note that the Rural Department and Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company (GLPC) have synergized their efforts to make Mission Mangalam work efficaciously towards the upliftment of the rural women across the state. The thriving implementation of this scheme has brought about a fundamental change in the rural lifestyle.

Gujarat, in my confidence, is marching ahead to set an example that women of our country are an outstanding source of inclusion and great to work along. And them, the women are, in my belief, are the true idols to look up to and learn from.

Mission Mangalam has seeded many benefits including understanding banking, financial independency and security, utilizing the resources present around them more efficiently. It has also broken the social obligations and barriers that women have been bound to for years together. Above all, it has instilled a sense of pride and independence while giving them the confidence to stand up to be heard.

I congratulate the team at Krab Media who have brought Rural Footprints to life with its stunning visuals intertwined with play of words captivating the stories of those people who are much like the rest of us but have found ways to seize every opportunity thrown their way, big or small.





Foreword



Mr. V. Thiruppugazh, IAS
Secretary & Commissioner, RDA

As Mr. Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General rightly said, “There is no tool for development more effective than the Empowerment of Women”.

Women reflect the very dynamism in every sphere. If women are given the power in their hands, they will be two steps ahead of men.

I am honoured to be a part of this wonderful initiative that represents the motive and activities taken up by Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company (GLPC). With a mission in mind, the Government of Gujarat has launched an integrated and action driven poverty alleviation program - *Mission Mangalam* that aims to instill skills development and promote empowerment and independence among rural women of the state.

Over the years, Gujarat has accomplished a lot under its name in industrialization and rural development. “*Rural Footprints – Empowering Women, Enriching Lives*” is an illustrious effort put together by Diinesh Kumble and his team at Krab Media to bring to your visual platter, the lesser known side of Gujarat’s development, its great rural population and the many intricacies within which their lives revolve. Diinesh’s long association with Gujarat has been instrumental in representing Gujarat, through the eyes of a native.

Mission Mangalam has taken great steps to alleviate women and empower them to fend for themselves, helping them become economically independent and earn a position in the society. It is our honest endeavour to emancipate rural women and give them their rightful position and respect without losing the touch of their culture and ethos.

I hope through this book, readers get a clear perspective of the immense efforts made by our department and the initiatives and opportunities taken by the rural women of Gujarat to help themselves get up and work hard.



Acknowledgement

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श्रमयोग • लिंगरत्न • समृद्धि

Mission Mangalam

towards the

5th year

...and many more



24 lakh
women



2 lakh
Sakhhi Mandals

Managing ₹ 1,000 crores



अभ्युत्थानं - संरक्षणं - समृद्धि

The guiding principles of Mission Mangalam



Leveraging Industry partnerships and corporate MoUs

'the firm' goes to the community rather than people migrating to the firm



Improving demand and quality of rural products

creating a market for in urban areas



Inclusion of modern technology and processes

inversing the economies of scale



Linking local initiatives to international markets

Global Exposure



Mass empowerment through ownership assets with products

Community Upliftment

Benefits for the corporates

Offering Value-added Benefits just right for your Corporate Social Responsibility Programme

GLPC

At the forefront of women's empowerment

GLPC (Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company), an organization registered under The Companies Act, 1956 was set up with the express purpose of facilitating the empowerment of poor women. Serving as the executive arm of Mission Mangalam, the implementation agency for National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), the company has forged strategic partnerships between large industries and Self Help Groups (SHG), Producer Groups, Service Groups and Collectives of the poor through decentralized Micro Enterprise Ventures. The partnerships help to create intensive self-employment activities to SHG within their respective homes and villages, thereby empowering groups of women to earn and live a decent life on their own.

Aim



Promote Self Help Groups (SHG) or Sakhi Mandals of rural women

Provide access to resources

Strengthen livelihoods and quality of life

Core Objectives



Empower the poor by creating SHGs & Federations

Ensure access to Financial Services

Augment existing livelihood and enhance income



Explore livelihood opportunities

Create innovative ventures in rural service sector

Develop inclusive value chains





Introduction

"We need to change the outlook in the society. A woman, a mother holds the highest position, highest regard in our country. Men often underestimate the female members of their family. Women are two steps ahead of men. We need to recognise their power."

Narendra Modi, Prime Minister, India

Embarking on a journey that I knew not what I would take a shufti at only left me numbed and percipient towards the end. Words spoken recently by the Prime Minister are befitting, much like a bird's eye view to why such a step was taken to empower the rural women of Gujarat. True to what he says, women are the spinal cord to every section of our life. This journey is that part of my travel diaries that will remain pinned with a bookmark – an aide-mémoire to know that there are stories of people who have seen worse than us and fought it with all gallantry and dignity.

Escaping from the bustling streets and din of the urban landscape, a trip to the dusty interior rural settings in the land of 'The Mahatma' is a riveting experience - an experience that will change our meaning and sense of real world. Gujarat is a land that offers rich aesthetics, cultural and traditional vista with a clean blend of the modern familiarity. Its people, food, history, heritage, archaeology, wildlife, traditions and culture deliver what is in true sense, a Vibrant Gujarat.

Every trip to Gujarat gives it a feel of a fresh story etched like a perennial colourful motion picture. The diversity is hard to miss. And on this occasion, I had the chance to permeate through the rural life in the tiny loci that this land beholds.

As I paced across these villages, it struck me that the whole shebang of Gujarati culture of treating the guests as akin to God





is never lost. Even in the tiniest nook and corner of our country, the statement, "atithi devo bhava" is sincerely committed to. These lovely villagers are no less; the beckoning hospitality of offering us the chaai (tea) and paani (water) is a generous touch of humanity that has remained through the ages in the times where modernity is fast perfusing the world.

If one takes a flashback of every decade that has passed, it is evident that women have always played a momentous role at every step and will continue as long as the human race runs – on a larger impression be it nation building or accomplishing a noted name in various fields of work or be it as simple as looking after the household. The society has succumbed to the discrimination happening at every step very ignorantly eating away that plinth of the country, which has great potential in perspectives. The advent of the early 19th century saw women finally breaking the shackles and going out to work in factories, fields and other places despite the pervasiveness of discrimination.

Today we see a plethora of social activists and reformists fighting for women's rights and empowerment. In a society that follows no defined rules, women, sadly, have always been the victims to these whims of the so-called societal norms. However, with innumerable people sweating out to spread the awareness, change has seen a slow, but sure growth. The change in society at large, numerous empowerment schemes mooted by the Government, aided by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities of socially conscious corporate houses are making quite the difference step by step.

I can say that it is beyond any human imagination of the societal norms what once existed here in Gujarat could have substantially changed over time thus remoulding the fate of many rural women today emphatically. What is appreciable is the support lent by the men of the same society who were once ardent adherers of these norms handed down to them over generations in the name of patriarchy. Poignantly, the 'educated' men of the modern social order need to learn from these men.

It was overwhelming to learn that these are the same women equipped to face the challenges that life presents them today, coming from harsh realities of superstition and unfathomable background life spiel. These narratives of their fearlessness and headship left me speechless. Undaunted by their past, women from these rural backdrops have come forward to make a meaningful life for themselves and the others, accepting and adapting to the measures like the Mission Mangalam, executed

under the collective stewardship of - The Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company Ltd. (GLPC) – a government of Gujarat undertaking - uniquely thought of for women. From beliefs that kept them home bound and subservient to the men of the household to the widows that saw a closed door at their parents', everything that they have been through only teaches us to be more humble and thankful for what we have. These women have accomplished what we only battle to achieve.

"Rural Footprints" is a small step to showcase the untold diegesis, no less, of the women that became the hero of their lives and became an inspiration for others to follow suit. I hope this book brings to your life, a realisation that life is intricate and complex beyond any mortal's cognizance and that there is more to it than we imagine.

From Rani-ni-vav (pic. on right) in Patan, the ultimate symbol of women power - a queen who built a multi-storeyed step-well in memory of her husband - to the hilly regions of Dahod via Godhra to Chhota Udepur and Dangs to the developed agricultural fields of Valsad to the coastline of Surat and Navasari to urban centres of Vadodara, Ahmedabad to the salty mud-flats of Kutch to the jungles of Junagad and Girnar where lions roar but lioness tend to the family to the cotton fields of Surendranagar to the highly ingenious ladies of Rajkot preparing khakras and papads for the world...these are tales of unarticulated valour and unbounded passion to go beyond the said social norms of the society and create a secure livelihood for themselves and their families. These are tales that have taught the women not to be timid.

Every success story, I note, is because these women have shown immense courage and have come together to make a better life for themselves. Their humbleness is what makes you veritably feel, 'Home is where the heartland really is' as it unfolds in the patchwork exhibit right at the beginning of this journey - a story of how a village was restored to its original glory with the power of women - right up to the modern day of a women Self Help Group taking over the cudgels from powerful men to provide potable water, the elixir of life to the village.





Mission Mangalam

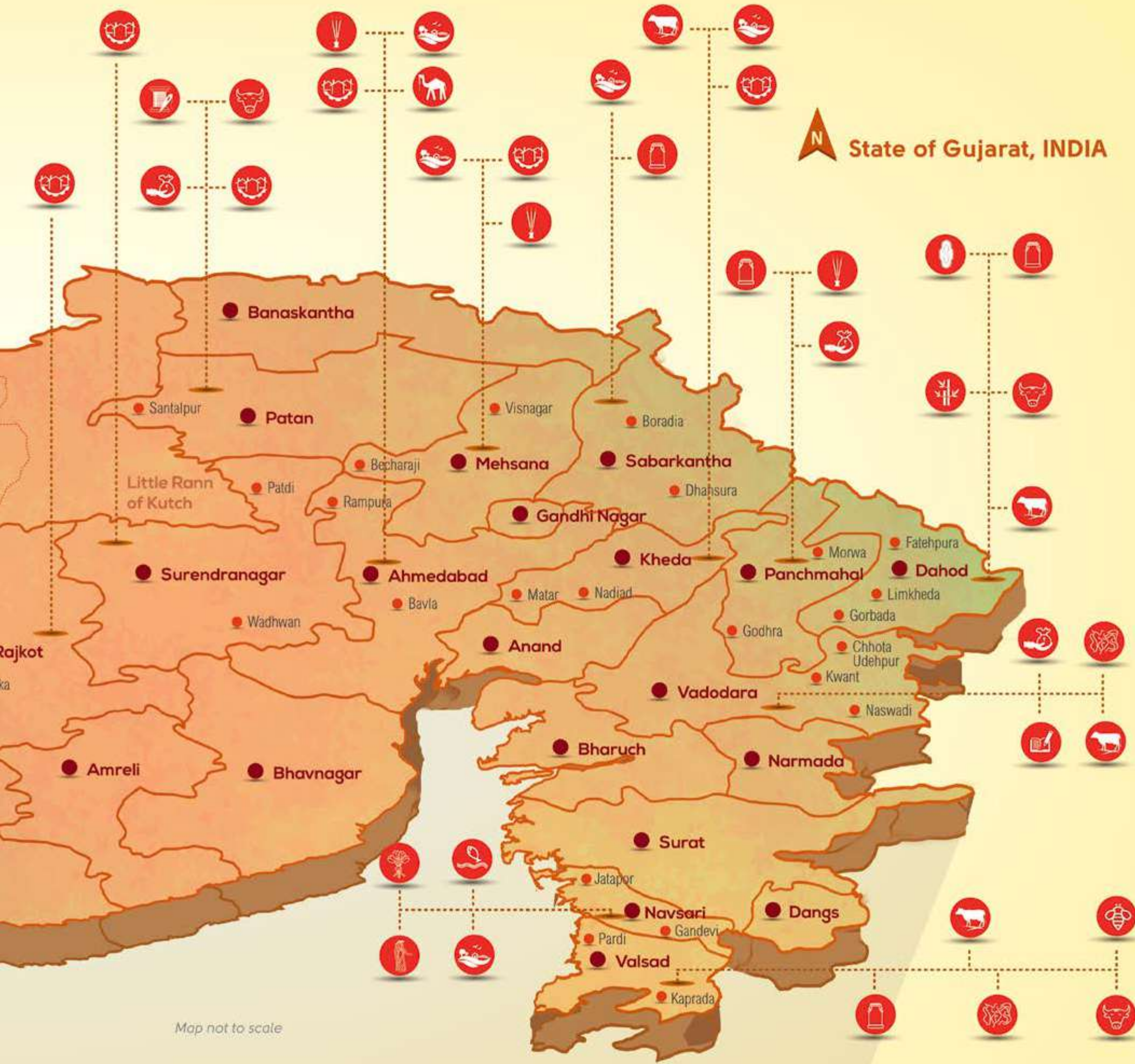
Activities-Snippet

● District ● Visited

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---|----------------------|
|  | Agarbatti |  | Farming/Horticulture |
|  | Animal Husbandry |  | Fishery |
|  | Artificial flower Making |  | literacy |
|  | Bamboo |  | Rural Services |
|  | Bee keeping |  | Sanitary |
|  | Cottage Industry |  | Sewing |
|  | Micro Finance |  | Soft toys |
|  | Dairy Co-operative |  | Vermicompost |
|  | Doll Making | | |



State of Gujarat, INDIA



Map not to scale

Changes come in small patches

Subhadraben

Needlework has many facets and Gujarat has amassed the creative side over time – a culture shared with fellow members that have been handed down to generations. The handicrafts of this state extensively diverge in its patterns bringing to life, various elements and magnificent handworks in large forms. Patch work among them is an interesting work of art that involves patching little pieces of fabric in different shapes and sizes depicting icons from daily life on to a large piece of cloth.

Originally from Kutch, Subhadraben has taken this art form to a whole new altitude and has given it a whole new understanding. She has used a wide piece of cloth to depict the life in her village, the stages of difficulties and harmony that each one has experienced there.

The picture tells the tale of the early days when there were lush green trees swaying to the breeze and everything was a rosy picture. The next part depicts how humans intervened with nature, cut trees and destroyed the natural setting. The story continues to show how the villagers burnt the wood and all that was green was gone. The lands became barren and there was scarcity of water. The different coloured clothes she has used to illustrate the story does enough justice to the human imagination. Life had to continue and to survive they started getting water tankers to the village. People became selfish and fought over water.

The next part of the art shows how the women of the village came together to bring about a change in the situation. They started educating other women and each one started planting



saplings. In no time, they saw the difference. The fact that it has been put to perfection on the cloth speaks for the changes they brought in reality. It shows the stark changes – lush green trees everywhere and the entrance decorated by a line of flower plants, the water filled in ponds in abundance and rains pouring down in its song. It is truly a masterpiece of imagination, patience, creativity and fastidiousness.

Subhadraben has exhibited her works in India and internationally as well. She has travelled to countries carrying the art work that has a story behind its existence. Unfazed by the fact that she lost many of her work in the 2014 Kashmir floods (Jammu and Kashmir, India), she has the perseverance to recreate the magic that she hopes to take to as many people within and across borders.



Strand of opportunity



The ethnicity of Gujarat is synchronous with their delicate forms of art and crafts. From crafting artefacts to weaving saris, these diverse forms come with a touch of the aesthetic appeal. The famous Patola of Patan is known for its colourful geometrical motifs carefully crafted radiating stunning beauty. The unique tie and weave method of Patola results in identical patterns on both the sides of the fabric.

Fascinatingly, these are not available over the counters anywhere in India or even across Gujarat. The orders are generally placed directly and so is the delivery model. The history has an interesting twist to this particular art form. Dating to about 900 years ago, from the era of Maharaja Kumarpal and Kalikal Sarvagnya Acharya Hemchandracharya's time, the traditional art form has followed the patriarchy order of sorts.

Until recently, women have never been involved in the making of these patterned fabrics. The reason is simply beyond anyone's comprehension – that daughters (women generally), will be

married off to a different family and if they continue the art, then the trademarks of making are a give out to other families. Originally, these craftsmen root down to the South of India and hail from the Salvi families.

Generally a handloom sari or basically any fabric does not last for 80-100 years. The specialty of Patola lies in its test of time and long endurance – not only does it last beyond 100 years, the resale value is much higher than the purchase value. Added to it, these are the only types to keep a fast colour close to 300 years without fading. So goes the saying in Gujarati, "Padi patole bhat, fate pan fite nahi" (The designs may wear and tear but the colours shall never fade).

Today, men have changed their attitude and have introduced this art to the women of a self-help group, albeit just the first steps in the entire process. This small change in mindset to preserve the art form is a giant step towards inclusiveness.





Packs of joy

Jitoda in Chansma Taluka (Patan District) is engaged in the manufacture of "Take Home Ration", a scheme initiated by the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Mission Mangalam through their SHGs. The Parivar Sakhi Sangh set up an year ago has 70 women engaged in the activity.



Keeping in mind an effort to improve and provide better health conditions, supplementary food is provided as Take Home Ration to all children under six years, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating mothers.

Anganwadi workers distribute these free packets of ready-to-cook foods from Anganwadi centers (AWCs). The women participate in various capacities, from back-end processes to distribution and management. Today they stand benefitted more than what they thought this would fetch them, apart from gaining in confidence of operating large machinery.



Skilling to Earn

Unemployment is not an uncommon factor even in the modern urban setting. Many youth from rural and semi-urban backdrops often do not have access to vocation worthy education. They however do have the skills to fit in white collar jobs. This mismatch of potentiality has led to waste of human resources and talent.

It is under these circumstances that Rural Self Employment Training Institute (RSETI) was initiated by the government with support from local banks.

With an objective to identify, orient, motivate, train and assist the rural youth on self-employment as an alternate career, RSETI in association with Mission Mangalam stands at having trained rural women across Gujarat. Training imparted are in the areas of dress designing, agarbatti making, soft toys making, embroidery, driving and fabric painting are taught. Today RSETI is present in 35 districts.





The biggest risk is NOT taking it

Mamtaben Raval

29 year old Mamtaben Raval's story is of the likes that make any situation turn in their favour. Discontentment over time led her to seek change. With a well-to-do family background, Mamtaben has pursued her B. Ed and a Master's Degree too. Her father was a bank manager and she was married to an advocate.

A teaching job in a school quelled her restless spirit for a while but soon enough she found that it was not enough to fuel her drive. The job gave her a paltry salary making her realise that there was more she could do. While there was no compulsive financial reason for her to seek work, she did feel the tangible need for a better lifestyle, which a regular job was unable to provide. More importantly, Mamtaben wanted to do something that would define her identity and carve a niche around her.



The news about RSETI initiated training fell on her ears and a training in beauty care seemed like a novel concept. She underwent the training that not only taught her the basics of professional beauty care service but also the dynamics of running this business. In Mamtaben's case, the only challenge was the social mindset in purview of the job. Her father backed her initiative and the result was 'Mamta Beauty Parlour'. Today she has plans of starting her own chain and hopes to bring in the best with no compromise on quality.

This is a story of changing mindsets where old ideas prevail but need to be weeded out in an attempt to bring class examples of the likes of Mamtaben to the forefront.



Skill rescued **fate**

Bhikiben Thakur

Hailing from Katra, Harej Taluk in Patan district, Bhikiben Thakur's name stands for a young girl of 21 who is the icon of success. Her story is intertwined with culture and the power of the human spirit. Her marriage made her a mere cog in a wheel of social customs.

I was too bewildered to hear what followed. While we may have a faint idea of such unheard of customs and traditions, this arguably was something that was beyond my ken. Bhikiben was a part of that culture practice what one could say was a gamble of the unthinkable. Here girls are exchanged in marriages and their respective brothers accordingly win the other girl as their brides. Discrepancies brewing in her brother's family inflicted serious troubles in her life; where, in a traditional Indian setting, the family is the fulcrum on which personal relationships rest, it is impossible to be impervious by what happens in other marriages within the family. It came to a point where she was driven out from her home.

With no education and no other prospects to go ahead in life, she went back to live with her parents. Ironically, over time while her brother's marriage survived, Bhikiben's own woes worsened - an un-supportive husband and parents mired in their own financial problems did not help.

Her interests in stitching paved the way for her independence when she attended the free 30 day residential workshop conducted by the RSETI reigned by GLPC. This not only was a foundation for her livelihood but also seeded a motivation and gave her new direction in her life. In a surprise turn of events, an encouraging father

bought her a sewing machine. Today she earns her livelihood with it, supports her family and also helps repay her father's loan.

She now aspires to be a fashion designer and create designs. Having tasted success in her own way and gaining a social standing in her immediate circles, Bhikiben wants to go back to her family and wants to support for her children's education.





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Saleha Alam Khan comes from a family of nine children. When her father left handcarts to run an auto rickshaw to lug cargo, inspiration knew no bounds for her. Saleha wanted to drive and run an auto rickshaw herself.

However, given the family's financial circumstances, she decided to join the SHG. She met the group unit that made kites during kite festival and became part of it. Her life now revolves around riding the auto and making and selling kites. Saleha is proud of her work.

Today she is a reason for pride for the whole of Patan and the

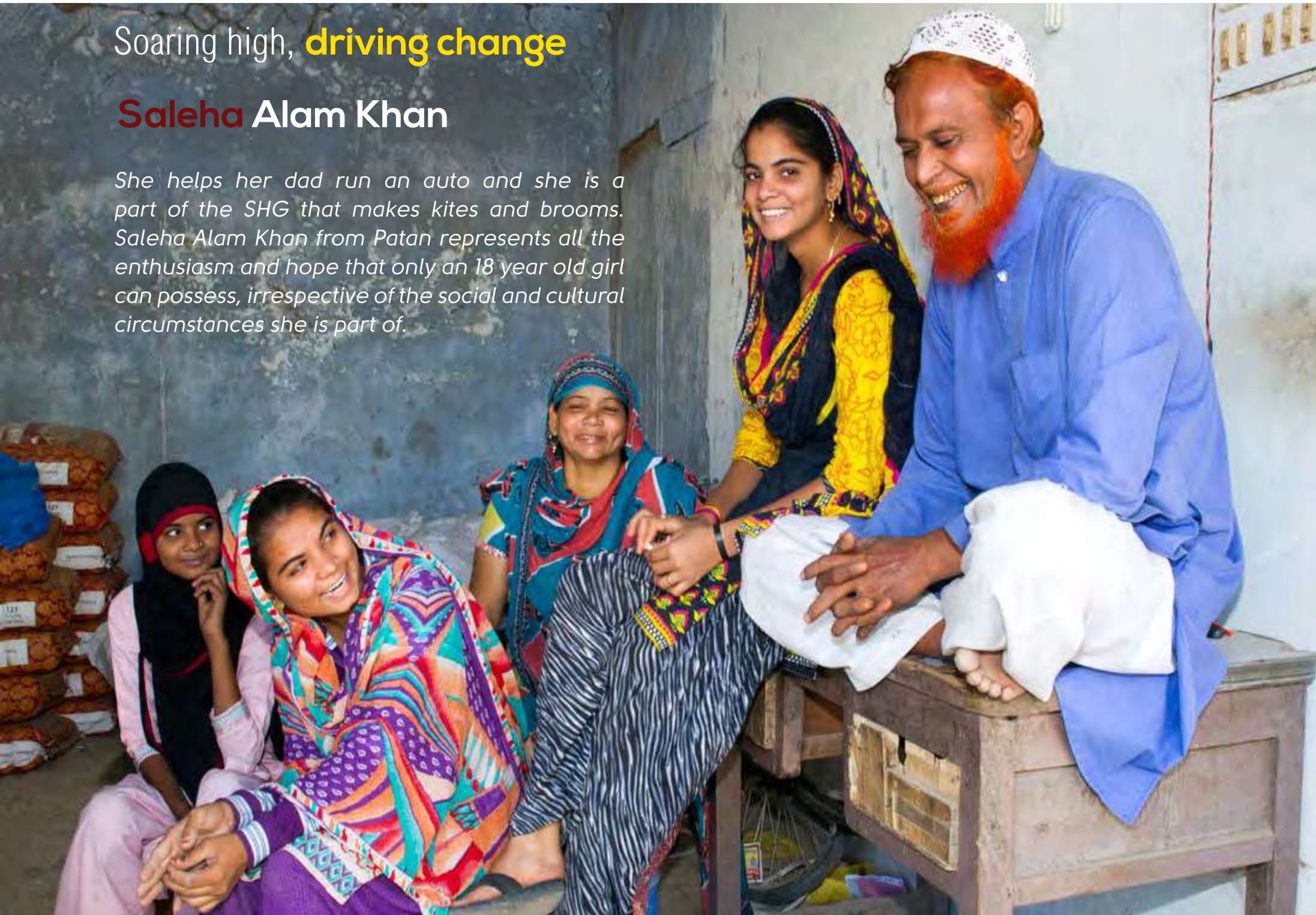
larger community. Little wonder that Saleha fiercely cherishes her independence. She also has dreams of securing a job as a driver of a four-wheeler soon. She wants to continue this post her marriage too.

What is interesting about Saleha's story is the refreshing new peek it offers. A girl in a conservative social scenario doing a job, traditionally considered a man's is reassuring. Added to it is the fact that she is part of a self-sustaining financial group of women that gives her new livelihood means and a new sense of confidence.

Soaring high, **driving change**

Saleha Alam Khan

She helps her dad run an auto and she is a part of the SHG that makes kites and brooms. Saleha Alam Khan from Patan represents all the enthusiasm and hope that only an 18 year old girl can possess, irrespective of the social and cultural circumstances she is part of.





Kneading a livelihood

The first of the villages I visited was Kukrena (Sami Taluk, Patan District) that put in my visual awning, a complete evince of the ethos of a rural lifestyle. The women running the Sree Jai Ambe Sakhi Mandal (SHG) group makes papads as a predominant activity. It has been active since three years under the headship of Manharba Praveen Singh Vaghela.

For those caught in the swing of urban life, consumption of products often revolve around supermarket purchases and their subsequent use and disposal. It is a vicious cycle. Landings in our carry bags are nothing compared to the work put in by the women, only unspoken of. These women are symbolic of an inspiring story tucked away within this village, a story that is as much about economic changes as about empowering transformation.



Creating colourful ensembles



Meenaba Bharath Singh Vaghela

There is a time today when we rush into the small exhibitions that come and go out of our cities selling things we gleefully splurge our earnings on. Not once have we reflected on where these beautiful things are made.

Sami Taluk in the Patan district has two more villages where colourful threads going in and out of the fabric have become an intrepid way of life. Gujarat has wide-ranging arts and crafts. Among many, needlework is one that has gripped the most attention across the country and beyond its borders.

Moving from Kutch after her marriage, Meenaba Bharath Singh Vaghela's creativity seemed to be ebbing away in the highly conservative household of her in-laws. She realised that the entire women folk of the village seemed suppressed of their creativity and were eager to unleash it. Within the confinement of her home, she could



not withhold her passion for long. Borrowing funds from a bank and with Mission Mangalam coming to her aid, there was no stopping Meenaba. She formed the SHG where women were individually tutored by her on the nuances of the many forms of Kutchi embroidery. Slowly, the women gained experience and in not time, they procured raw materials from Kutch stitching their way to success.

Challenges ranging from making ends meet to not having a roof over one's head, bringing a change to the life of the villagers has been quite a journey. Internal lending, revolving funds and a contract with 'Shrujan' have made the economic condition of the village see a ray of hope.

Their smiles ring the sound of confidence and economic independence.



Breaking the shackles

Geetaba Jadeja

Geetaba Jadeja, widowed at the onset of her teenage discovered that the different cultural mindsets changed as she redefined her own life circumstances. Her story has received honours from the former Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Geetaba was married when she was 13 and became a widow just five days after her wedding. It certainly was not an easy life for her. Dwelling in a section of the community where widowhood spells gloom, she faced worse scenarios that her young mind could imagine. Words can never do justice to the story I heard and what follows.

At a tender age, when life begins to unfurl for any teenager, Geetaba faced those situations, which she could never probably imagine. While we would use the word hell loosely, here was a young life that unfortunately experienced it. Confined to the four walls of the house, molested by family members and made to toil physically, living became survival. She was also a victim of another traditional mindset where daughters once married were 'someone else's responsibility'. This meant that she had little or no hopes to seek support from parents' either.

Unable to bear the circumstances at her in-laws' she somehow sought refuge at her parents. A change of place definitely meant very little inflow in the socio-economic setting that Geetaba was part of. She had to resort to physical labour, a shade better since it was still bearable. This respite was short lived. With her sister-in-law, a new member's entry to her family, she had to move back to her in-laws'. Everything was back to where it had started.

Nature definitely has its uncanny ways to present to us answers that we cannot find ourselves. While it brought a blow to the human lives there, the Gujarat earthquake in 2001 also brought back a fate that was going to bring a smile on Geetaba's face. In the rarest of stories that will ever be retold, a natural calamity proved to be a blessing in disguise for her when a Government Scheme – Indira Awaaz – was passed and lands were awarded to widowed victims of the massive earthquake. A well-wisher's assistance further helped her to secure a shelter for herself. Her success brought her the newfound respect from everyone including her own family members.

The new tides turned in her favour when she was introduced to the self-help group (SHG) executed by the GLPC. With some training and association with the SHG, tailoring paved a new way of life for her. Soon she started a SHG unit with tailoring as an occupation. In no time, it expanded to 36 units spanning a range of successful activities including Animal Husbandry, Embroidery, Handicrafts, Tailoring and many more. As income grew, the group also acquired 22 new sewing machines.

Today Geetaba's name is a voice to surmise with. Having taken the unimaginable stride, today she has moved to a status where she, in her capacity, helps everyone. From facilitating ambulance services to getting pension grants cleared, she lends a hand in whatever manner possible. Like most driven individuals who have been pushed by trying situations, Geetaba continues to feed new aspirations in herself. She now hopes to be the Sarpanch (village head) and wants to aid other women towards success.





Carving one's own path

Manba Jadeja

I must say, Indians have this notion of getting their daughter 'married off' at the 'right time'. Debatably, there have been equal numbers of success and failures. But the story of Manba Jadeja is true of what some women face even today, only silently.

Married to someone 35 years older than her – old enough to be her father actually – and already married once, Manba's story is the one where daughters are seen as 'responsibility'. It is a tale of unsuitable marriage completely uncondusive to emotional wellbeing.

Unwilling to let fate take its own course, Manba became part of the SHG through a chance meeting. With the group's loan she purchased a buffalo through which she earns her own living. Today she stands as an example of someone who will go lengths to change the life circumstances and support and sustain oneself financially.

Parvatiben Bhariya

The SHG in Dhangariya village is named Jai Gayatri Sakhi Mandal. Parvatiben Bhariya owns two buffaloes purchased under the Buffalo Financing scheme of the Mission Mangalam programme. She now augments the income earned from farming with buffalo rearing that sustains her household apart from financing the education of her two children.

Other members in the group partake in financial schemes benefitting from interest earned through revolving savings.





The sparkle
of hope





Everything is **possible**

Panchal Chandrikaben

Health I believe, for most of us, is something that we take for granted. Often it takes a breakdown to make us pause and ponder on the fragility of life. In the rural context, where survival is the binding thread of everyday life, such reflections are a luxury. Health, in such a scenario, is relevant only to the extent of how it affects the livelihood.

Kidney failure turned Panchal Chandrikaben's life dramatically beyond the physical dimension. Chandrikaben discovered her kidney failure at the age of 8 and ever since, her life has revolved around a series of medical treatments and expenses. Her family ran a sweet shop and her mother was a homemaker. She was pushed into working very early in life when her father further suffered two heart attacks. An occupation was necessary to care for the family.

At the age of 14, she started learning how to sew ensuring that it would cover her medical expenses with it. Such circumstance meant farewell to education and she stopped schooling after

It is relatively common knowledge that a woman's best friend, the Diamond - that piece of carbon mined in far away mines of Africa gets its sparkle by cutting and polishing - an art mastered by the craftsmen in Surat. Diamond polishing has traditionally been a man's forte. Who would have thought that this intricate operation would be carried out by women in a far away village in Patan district. The SHG here with Mission Mangalam's involvement are precisely doing this and doing well - breaking free of man's stranglehold of this domain.



class 12. In the expected fashion, the next phase of her life was marriage. Her condition made her realise that she would be unable to bear a child and thus she sought divorce from her husband.

Immense physical labour made life difficult and the need to be financially independent was even more pronounced now. At this juncture she chanced upon the SHG and got involved in many activities of the group. Further she started her own group and thus began her diamond-polishing unit, which began by earning her a modest Rs 60 per day. Today she not only takes care of her own medical expenses, but also supports her father financially.

It was little wonder to see her father call her his 'son'. Having tasted the delicious flavours of independence, Chandrikaben is today content with her single status and her parents support her completely.



Breaking **free**

Sonalben Sadhu

Today an entrepreneur, Sonalben from Satalpur village has a tale of darkness behind her. Being a single mother is challenging enough but being a widowed single mother can be testing water in the sea, in a rural and conservative society. It took the purposefulness of a new vocation and the initiative towards financial independence in making her life a meaningful one.

Completely cut off from the outside world after marriage at 18, fate struck her when she was widowed at 23. Sonalben faced all the restrictions imposed on a young widow by a traditional rural society. She was not allowed to step outside the four walls of her house.

Sonalben acutely felt the need to earn. Having heard about SHG, she attended one of their meetings and soon enough wanted to start her own unit. It just took three meetings with the SHG to make this a reality. Her group now handles a range of businesses – handicrafts, cutlery, catering etc. It was now easier for her get loans through the group to establish more businesses.

The SHG not only supported her financially but also built a better place for her to live in. Today she is a content mother who pays for the education of her children and supports the family financially.





Stitching together a **new life**

Panchal **Rekhaben**

Leaving behind a bad marriage of eight years, a difficult husband and two children and moving back to parents' was not an easy decision. Panchal Rekhaben faced social ostracization. This is a culture, which does not take kindly to a woman who breaks away from the shackles of her marriage, no matter what her reasons may be. Rekhaben however had supportive parents. The emotional support notwithstanding, she still had to work for a living. A chance meeting with the SHG offered a ray of hope. She learnt stitching and started to earn for herself. Insufficient yet, she had to work as a housemaid to support herself and her family.

Under Mission Mangalam's internal lending scheme of the SHG, she bought a sewing machine. She not only established stitching as her main occupation, but also started her own self-help groups, which are self-sustained and doing well. Her savings helped her clear loans to buy back the land mortgaged by her father. She has even managed to educate her children.

Rekhaben wants to remain with the SHG as it not only sustains her motivational levels but also facilitates immediate finance whenever she needs it. Her decision of walking out of the marriage made her come out of the cocoon of hopelessness.

Her message to all other women is thus very clear – "Come out and do something because, that is the way it should be."



Tasting Sweet Success

Manishaben Ramabhai Meda

When we sit back and bite into scrumptious kulfis at our local Amul store, I bet the very kulfi that nobody would have imagined; that similar Amul stores in remote parts of Gujarat are one of the biggest sources of livelihood for hundreds of women.

Hidden in the radius of Dahod and many other centres across the state, the standalone Amul Parlours were established about a year ago after a MoU under Mission Mangalam was signed with the conglomerate during the Vibrant Gujarat summit in 2013. Who would have thought that the inception of such an idea would have been a driving force for women to come out of their hooded homemaker status and become that extra bread earner for the family?

The SHG in Dahod has ten members and is led by Manishaben Ramabhai Meda. Each member of the group puts in a sum of 100 rupees every month. If there is someone from the group who faces a crisis situation, the rest of the members lend her the saved money.



Kashmira Thohar

Among them is Savitaben Meda, a 38 year old woman who joined the SHG in 2013. A mother of three, she faced hardships in life. She has two boys who are studying in college and a daughter who is married. Financing the basic needs was hard to come by. Her husband works as a farm labourer outside Dahod and visits home once in two months. To make ends meet, she joined the self-help group. The women of the group lent her the saved money and paid for her children's education. Today, she stands out as a confident person.

Another Amul Parlour in Dahod is run by another group of ten women. Named Riya Amul Parlour and anchored by Kashmira Thohar, it has been running successfully for almost a year.



Gauriben Jani

Over the years, Gauriben Jani had put her creative talent to use by making interesting artefacts out of coir. With no prior background in business or even an inclination of banking and its benefits, Gauriben was reserved to her fate of making coir dolls.

Mission Mangalam taught her the benefits of a SHG, and Gauriben now in her 60s did not hesitate. She opened up a Mangalam Amul Parlour in Bechraji with the loan offered to the group. As leader of this SHG, she has gained immensely in confidence to even handle banking and financial affairs for the group. She is overcome with pride every time someone in her village recognizes her as the women behind the counter at the Amul parlour.



Hail hygiene



Silent Valour

Gajjiben

Meeting Gajjiben (in pic. seated in third row, second from left) felt like entering another world altogether. Worries and troubles were no different for her from what seems to be a picture of most rural women pinned across the state. She has four children - two sons and two daughters - who are the less fortunate and never had any privilege to attend school.

Her husband is a migratory farmer whose meagre income was never enough to make ends meet. As the children grew, the eldest son accompanied his father to work. While we are busy supporting the idea that education knows no age, here was a boy who was refused admission into any school because he had grown past his age. The little boy had no option but to take up farming.

Gajjiben took it upon herself and joined this SHG in the hope to accumulate some source of regular income for her family. She recalls the hard days, not just for surviving but coping and living between the societies as well. There was none who spoke to them or visited their family. The days were deep down the well, so hard that it was difficult to even offer a cup of tea to the guests.

Today she is satisfied that her family is better off. Her sudden smile is clear indication that life has indeed changed over the past years. Her story is nothing but silent valour and success.









Addressing a **need**

On NH 59, between Dahod and Godhra, lies the village of Dhadela - a humble tribal settlement nestled among small rolling hills. Here seasonal farming was the only source of income until the initiation of Mission Mangalam. Mirroring the success of the SHGs from nearby villages, Goatery forms the central activity for women in the groups.

Quite a simple process – each woman of the group were financed to acquire two female goats and one of them, a male goat. Under the scheme, women from the group purchased each goat at Rs. 750, inclusive of insurance – subsidised from the actual cost of Rs. 3,000 per goat.

Goat milk is nutritious and each goat produces about 500 ml of milk every day. Milk addresses the problem of malnourishment among kids in these rural regions. With goat-milk now being offered at relatively low price, it is but noticeable that there have been significant changes in the growth and development of children in the region and malnutrition levels have dropped.



Courage beyond **individual faculty**

Savitaben Ranchodbhai Chamara

Savitaben, 48, a mother of two – her story is one of strength and faith in one's own abilities. Tragedy struck when her husband passed away eight years back. He succumbed to a heart attack. My thoughts befuddled as I heard her story further. It simply takes enormous weave of breaths to even imagine the dark days she has seen.

Her married son passed away six months later caving into fever. Her other son is a farmer. She lives with her daughter-in-law, and her granddaughter attends the local school. Savithaben was into farming and kept migrating in search of farm-labour. She faced penury and could not afford proper food or medicine. To add to her woes, she had no relatives to lean on.

Now, having settled in Dhadela, she has associated herself with the SHG for 4 years. This has paved a way for her to stay at one place and not migrate in search of odd jobs to keep the family going. She still practices farming but in her own farm. There were days when she could not get out the house, literally. Today she takes that extra step to help people in ways she can. She visits the Taluka Police Station to help people, and even assists as a midwife at the local medical facility.

The good days have only begun for her. It was really heartening to learn that Savithaben attended training sessions on marketing, which she imparts at the SHG.





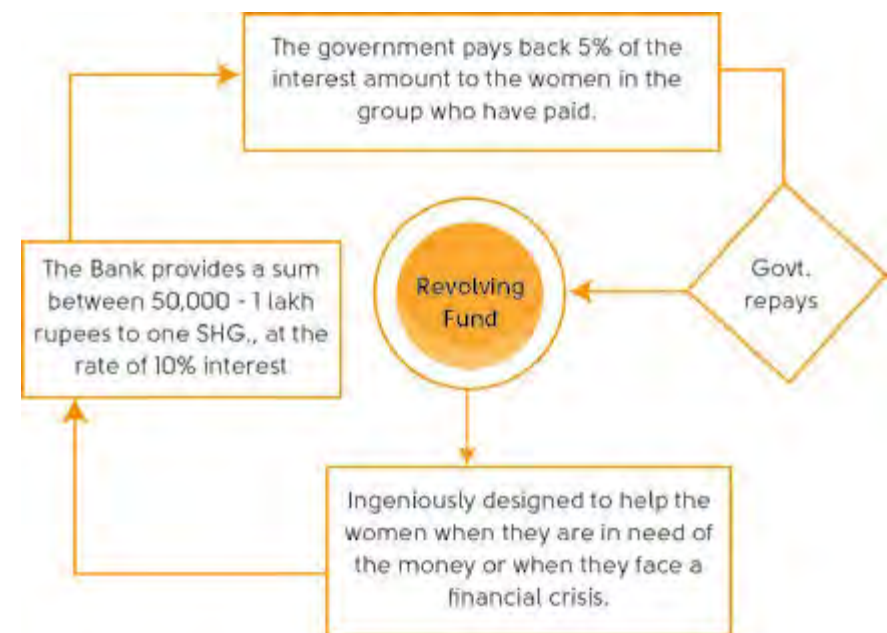




Revolving success

A melting pot of cultures, the tiny hamlet of Ghughas bordering with Rajasthan nurtures another set of SHG members involved in Goatery.

The interaction with the group members was an eye-opener. These people are aware of the benefits of joining the self-help groups. They continuously try and engage reluctant members of the society to enrol and blend in. A tiny conversation revealed the dynamics of how the SHG works - the leader is selected once every two or three years.



The confidence of the group is very evident. They are knowledgeable about financial savings and its advantages. Further conversations brought a smile on my face. These were people who did not know what a bank is or how it would be beneficial to them. After forming the SHG and interacting with GLPC executives they are now trained in banking, book-keeping and smart investing that helps them manage their personal finances and savings better.

I must confess that these groups have truly engaged themselves and mutually take care of their group members in times of need.







Going organic

Moving through narrow albeit paved lanes almost to the doorstep of every dwelling, we arrived to meet the SHG members of Bhuthardi village comprising mostly of tribal population. The tribal populace from this village are involved in dairy practices and production of vermin-compost.

The telling point that struck here, are that some of the women are partially literates. There are about 30 women who are involved in vermin-compost activities that augment their income from dairy sources.





Multiplying Yield

The women in the village of Bhe are involved mainly in seasonal farming. Farming activities include growing seasonal vegetables apart from maize and wheat. The formation of self-help groups helped them multiply their seasonal earning three-fold.

After undergoing rigorous training in multi-storeyed cultivation, the women now confidently grow 3 or more crops at the time, increasing their overall yield per month.









Milk contributes to
22% to the agricultural GDP

As per state census data,

42.6 lakhs

households out of a total of the

102 lakhs

are engaged in Dairy and Animal
Husbandry sectors

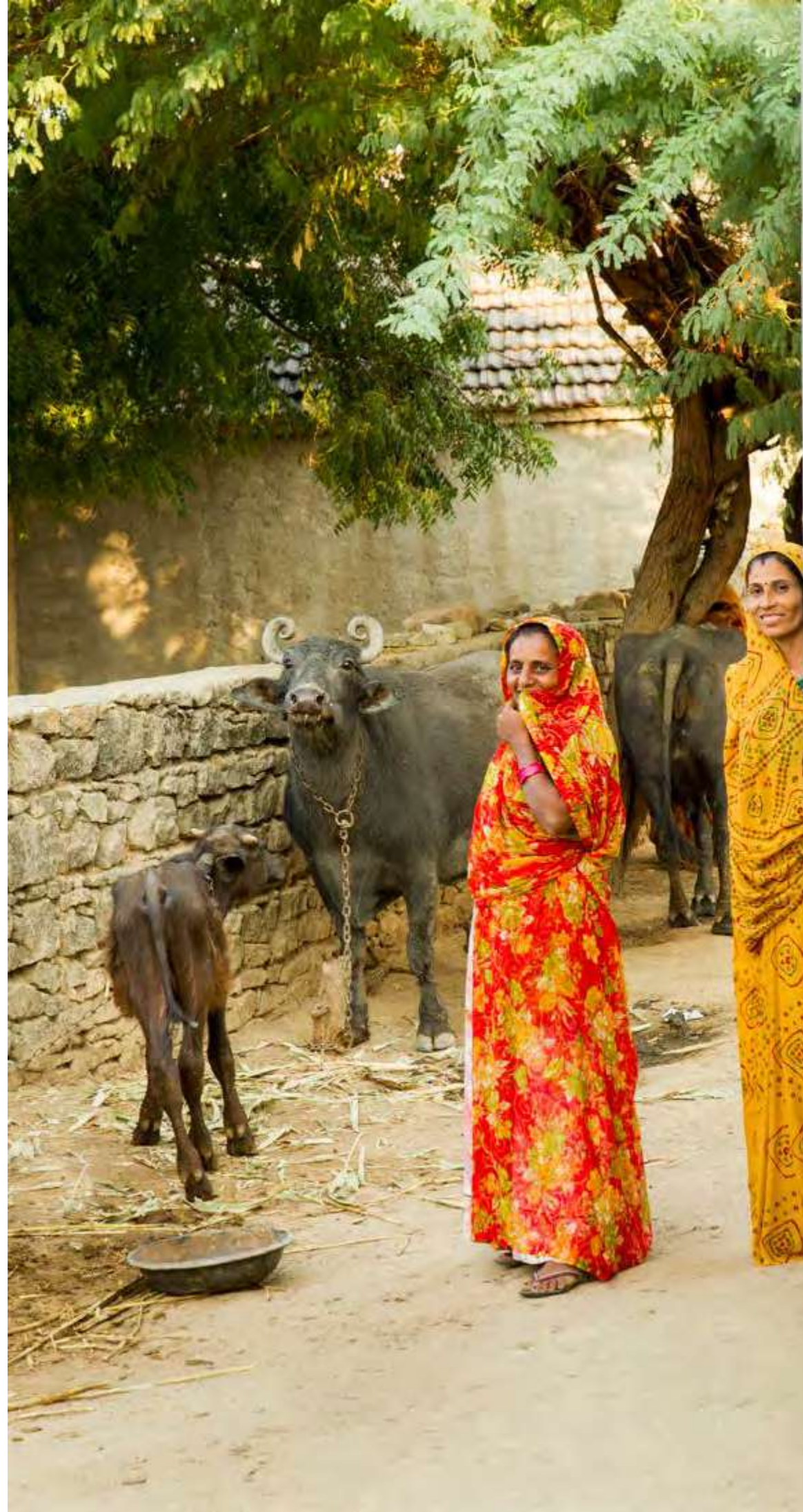


The state contributes

7.75%

share to the total milk
production of India





Going an **extra mile**

Narmadaben Kapsingh Behriya

Among the successful stories I have heard and seen so far, Narmadaben's story is the one that teaches us how one could take that extra mile for others and bring about a change. Narmadaben Kapsingh Behriya joined the SHG back in 2012. She too, like many others was into farm labour. Today, she stands testimony for the interest and efforts she put into being who she is today. She solely has refashioned her life - she visits the bank and can make her own transactions. This apart, she also helps other women in banking and has also pushed other women to join the SHG. Through this combined effort, all of them have learnt how to save. The SHG has witnessed inclusion and convergence in the farming and husbandry schemes.

Narmadaben also helps other women as only few can read and write. She continues to practice farming in the small area she has. She is one of the most respected members of the society. In the words of those who have seen her kind acts, she is the one who is always ready to help the needy.

Her story of success does not end here. She has even formed three other groups, and the women meet everyday at 6AM and 5PM to deliver milk at the dairy. They collectively pour about 200 litres of milk at both times of the day in the cooperative. The activity has been a light of hope for many women of the groups who are now seeing and realizing the benefits of saving some money for themselves, more importantly being independent.

Indeed, she stands as great inspiration for many others to follow.



Weaving



togetherness

The unfolding of the story in the tribal village of Gharbada was another eye-opener. The essence of teamwork leading to success has been a corporate parlay in many boardrooms across large conglomerates. I realise that in the race for individual glory, we seldom follow it. The story of coming together and the bonhomie these people share at work is an instance that could become a lesson in our homes and workplaces.

Every woman from this little village is involved in making artefacts using bamboo strips. These women individually tried to sell and make money for themselves from what they could create. More commonly, under the guise of competition, this is more or less what is happening in the societies we live in. Here, it was merely to earn a penny more and get through the day. Selling alone was an uphill task – from purchasing raw materials to making a finished product that would stand out from their neighbours to marketing and selling the wares in an open market – individually – just did not add up.

With the introduction of Mission Mangalam in 2010 and the formation of self-help groups, it brought together the women of the village to weave a turnaround in their fortunes. The Shiyari Sakhi Mandal stands as a common testimonial of benefits that accrue out of collective and cooperative activities.

The women now purchase raw materials together, weave baskets and artefacts based on their individual skill set, resulting in increased productivity, collective despatch – lowering operating costs, benefiting better profit-sharing.

I cannot help but admire the ingenuity of these women who used the scheme to their advantage to successfully demonstrate the spirit of teamwork.







“

The women of Kutch are renowned for their vibrant embroidery using a melange of colourful fabric and thread, embellished with mirrors & shells

”

Woven dreams

In a remote village in Rangpur on the fringes of the Gujarat – Madhya Pradesh border in the East, evidence of Kutch (laying in the far western corner of Gujarat) comes forth as a pleasant surprise. GLPC along with their non-government organisation partners are engaged in training a group of tribal women with little or no skill in embroidery – the Kutchi style of intricate thread work. The SHG formed after Mission Mangalam was introduced, is now involved in creating works of art with the needle and thread that adorn the aisles of outlets in metropolitan cities, providing livelihood to the women who would otherwise have migrated within the state to work as farm labourers.











One face many facets

As we proceeded to Oliyamba in Chotta Udepur district, we were welcomed by SHGs that were started in 2010 along with the Mission Mangalam programme. 120 members form a total of 12 different groups; all of them actively pursuing multiple activities.

I had the chance to meet Kokilaben Arjun Singh Ratwah, the leader of one of the groups. A mother of three – two boys and one girl, she proudly proclaims that she has passed her matriculation. As the leader, she teaches other women in her group about the intricacies of organic farming apart from imparting reading and writing skills.

GLPC and their implementation partners taught the group the nuances of optimal farming techniques, the importance of

Kokilaben Arjun Singh Ratwah

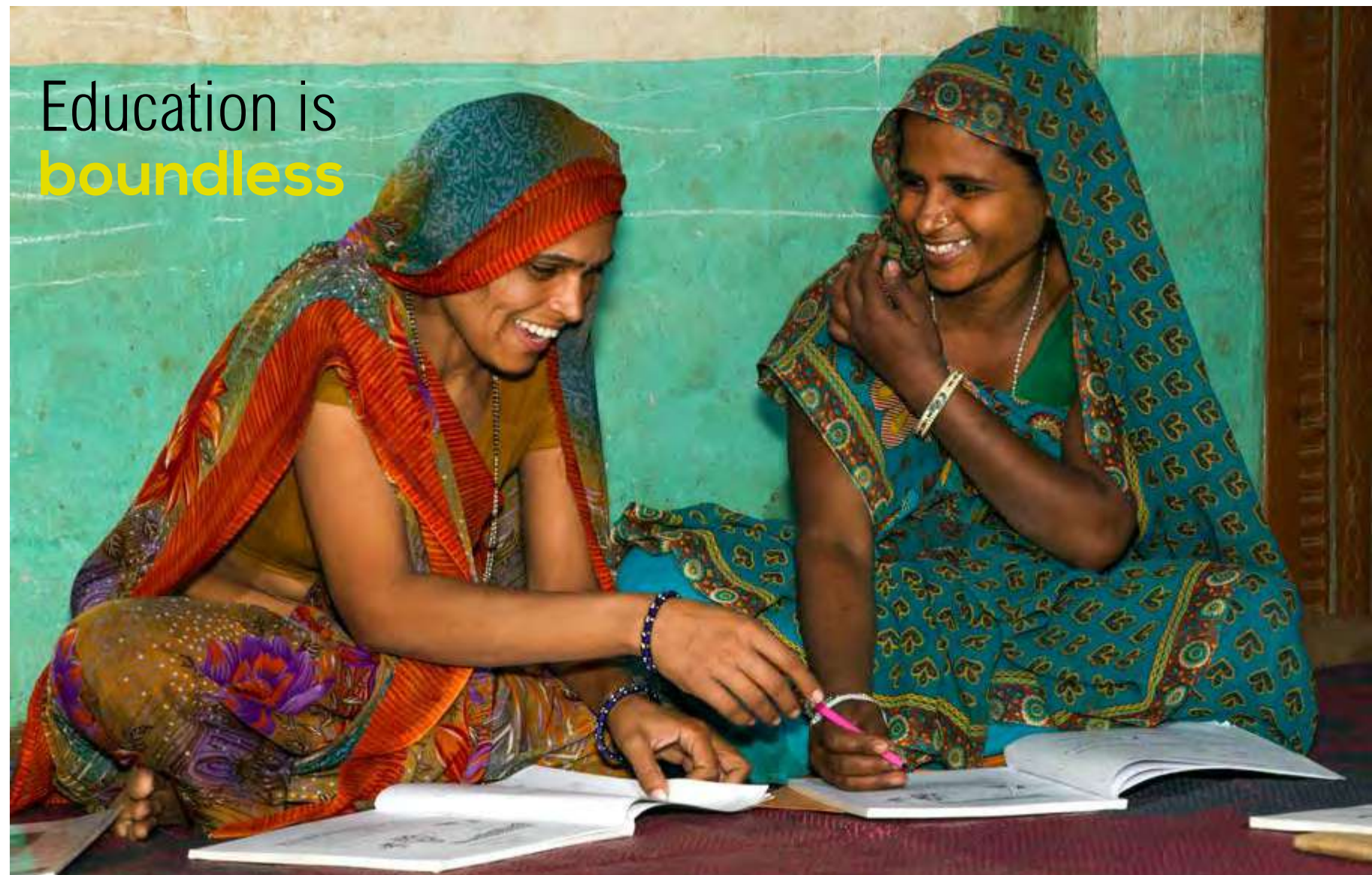
organic farming and the safe use of bio-pesticides made purely from organic substances. With Kokilaben leading from the front, the fields around her house now boast of a green-house nursery cultivating drumstick saplings. The saplings are then distributed by the SHG to neighbouring villages taking home the message of organised farming along with the added benefit of reducing calcium deficiency in rural women. Drumsticks are known to act as calcium supplements.

The use of bio-pesticides and organised farming techniques has resulted in better yields of maize productivity, and the number of crops has improved substantially.

Kokilaben, a true all-rounder!







Education is
boundless

Veenaben Vikrambhai

Oliyamba in Chotta Udepur district came as a surprise to me. Not because there was anything different that these women were doing yet there was something that was pursued as an activity apart from the regular farming and household chores that they did every day.

Veenaben Vikrambhai is the leader of the group here. Veenaben proudly mentions that she has completed her education till the 12th. Now, enrolled in a six-month diploma course, she manages to allocate some time for other women within her group to teach them the nuances of reading and writing through a structured method – her own syllabus, so to say. The progress is simply astounding. Women who were scared to touch a pen have begun to sign and most of them can read a line or two confidently.

Indeed, learning knows no boundaries, and the confidence that it brings breaks barriers.



Saving matters

Thadgam, a small village in Kawanth Taluka with a population of approximately 5,000 people boasts of a 24 member SHG. They collectively have utilized the benefits that Mission Mangalam provided to improve their financial standing. Their savings, investments and providing rotational micro financial support within the group has kept them in good stead.

Word of their financial acumen and success is slowly but surely spreading across neighbouring village folk and the SHG is gaining confidence as financial advisors.









Women from
5 villages are
involved

150
Women extract
60 kg of honey
per month



Honey is liquid gold

Driving amidst mango orchards and verdant agricultural land, the tiny village of Arnala in Pardi taluka appears abruptly or so I felt.

In the midst of this verdant environment, time seems to come to a quaint standstill. Meeting Geethaben Mukeshbhai, Alpaben Rameshbhai and Madhuben Dhirubhai – leaders of their respective SHGs is as interesting as the work they are involved in.

Their main source of livelihood has been the seasonal yields of mango and agricultural produce that are rain dependent. Rainfall is abundant here – it is called the Chirapunjee of Gujarat – because it records the highest rainfall every year. But the advent of monsoon brings with it, its own set of woes. During this lean season, the women of Arnala were introduced

to the methods of bee-keeping and honey production through Mission Mangalam. Assisted by GLPC, the women were trained by an expert for a week in the intricacies of honey production.

In an interesting tentacle to the story, Geetaben mentioned that in October 2014 alone, they extracted 60 kg of honey. She said that the habitation is suitable for bee keeping and it is an interesting activity to undertake.

There are five neighbouring villages that come under the same taluka and 150 women are involved in this activity giving them the opportunity to enrol their children in school.

Every drop is precious – ask these lady beekeepers and you will know what it means to them.



Morning mist & milk

Pravasa is a village that has a success story that can be painted on a large canvas.

In 2011, the local Dairy cooperative was linked to the local SHG. This brought about a sea change in the functioning of this dairy. Spotlessly clean, the award winning Vasudhara Cooperative Dairy is arguably the largest cooperative dairy in Gujarat, providing over 1,700 litres of milk every day. On an average there are 283 dairy members (both SHG and non SHG) out of which 260 come to deliver milk every day. The dairy with a storage capacity of 5,000 litres garners staggering revenues every month in comparison to any other nearby dairies in Valsad, Navasari or Dang districts.

Each SHG member's livelihood improved after getting associated with the dairy, thanks to the Mission Mangalam programme that enabled the SHG members to purchase cows and buffaloes.





The leader of this revolution in the region, meet Kalavatiben D. Patel – an iron lady with some useful education under her belt and the will to turn things around. Before joining the SHG in 2011, Kalavatiben was a simple homemaker.

Hailing from a relatively well-to-do family but married into a poorer one, she was enforced with daily chores and led the life of a homemaker and part-time cook preparing mid-day meals for school children to make ends meet. The then local dairy played truant with the milk vendors, often not making payments at all further leading to penury amongst the group, forcing Kalavatiben to think of doing something on her own.

Taking a village elder's advise seriously and with the dairy revolution in Gujarat picking up steam, Kalavatiben decided to start her own 'doodh mandal' and started encouraging her friends and family – mostly women – to join her in dairy activities. Seeing a veritable reluctance to her venture, she boldly announced the date of the opening of the dairy and asked anyone to join in at their own will – 35 women came forward and as the cliché goes – the rest is history.

Success breeds success! Word spread to other parts of the district about the seriousness and professionalism of this venture and the 'mandal' was soon becoming a movement. The then Managing Director of Vasudhara Dairy stepped forward to support her venture. Though she still faces opposition from the local Sarpanch of the village, there is no stopping this award-winning iron lady who ensured that the livelihood of many women in the vicinity improved apart from her own life.

She now is the proud owner of a mango orchard, a herd of buffaloes – a stable career for her husband who completed his Bachelor's Degree in Education on her insistence – son who studied medicine to become the first Doctor from Pravasa practising medicine therein and the daughter studying to become the first engineer from the village.

Today, she walks with a gait befitting a successful leader, encouraging her fellow SHG members to move alongside, constantly in the pursuit of better livelihood and empowerment and setting standards for other to emulate.



Milking **success**



In the district of Kaprada lies Ambeti with a modest population of 7,500. Women from here regularly used to travel to Vapi in search of industrial jobs. 40% of the women in this village are illiterates. It was difficult for these women to sustain their daily life.

The Mahila Sachalit Ahir Phaliambet Group was started as a pilot SHG project here in March 2014 under the headship of Sangeetaben. The government considered the geography of this land and saw that it was suitable for Buffalo Rearing. This region has good availability of food and since buffaloes have large appetite, the activity initially started off as a test but picked up speed quickly.

The scheme provides each woman with one buffalo. These buffaloes belong to the breed Mura from Haryana. Each buffalo gives about 6-8 litres of milk in a day. Vasundhara Dairy, the

local dairy associated with the SHG is where women deposit their collected milk every day. Dairy cooperative and farming are the core activities of 58 SHGs present here. The group gets sufficient financial aid every year; added to that is the dung that is used as a natural fertilizer resulting in increased monthly savings.

During the mango season, mainly in April and May, women from the group who own mango orchards tend to it. The SHG also has food processing units in Chikli where they extract the mango pulp, which is later used for the rest of the year.

Sangeetaben also owns a mango orchard. Apart from this, she grows green chillies, rice and papaya. As a leading member of the group, she also rears buffaloes. Multi-faceted, smart and sharp, the confidence in her stride is evident.

Sangeetaben



Flowery feat

Hethelben Chandrakanth

An innovative and novel idea shapes the lives and livelihood of the SHG, Jai Mallikeshwar led by Hethelben Chandrakanth from Machia Vasaan village in Ganderi taluka.

Hethelben struck upon the idea of creating artificial flower bouquets for home decoration and important events. Slowly but surely, the idea caught on; more and more enquiries to decorate wedding halls and arenas started filling in the coffers of this SHG, making her activity within the premises small and suffocating for want of space. She moved to the city to take up larger space and also encouraged many such groups in her village to take up the activity; even assisting them in acquiring grants under the government based schemes.

This activity has the potential to grow to a sizable business entity – what with everyone wanting artificial flowers to use as décor for their homes.



Delightful dolls

Geetaben Bharathbhai Rathore

An idea muted by the District Level Manager of GLPC in 2012 took roots to reshape the lives of many tribal village members of the SHG, Jai Mallikeshwari under the leadership of Geetaben Bharathbhai Rathore(left page).

The women knew tailoring but were unable to make ends meet with just that. During the Vibrant Gujarat summit in 2013, an MOU signed between Mission Mangalam and Praful (an NGO) ensured that the livelihood of the women improved their immediate imagination. The product – soft toys and soft cushions hemmed by SHG members are sold in outlets across the district. SHG members get a salary for the work carried out and this constant source of income has helped Geetaben enrol her 3 children in schools apart from meeting other expenses of the household.

Before the creation of the SHG, the tribals who do not own land used to be employed as temporary farm labourers.





Casting a **net**



Fishery as an activity was started in 2012 in the village of Moti Kakraad. The SHG led by Pushpaben is a seasonal revenue generator though it needs to be cultivated around the year. The entire village gathers around to watch them fish during the months of April and May making Pushpaben a popular figure in the area.



longest coastline of
1600 km

Ranks
1st in marine
fish production

1.98 lakh tonnes
exported every year

worth
₹ 2,156 crore





Cleanliness is Godliness

Swachha Bharat Abhiyan or Clean India Campaign – yes, this is the need of the hour!

I travelled to the land which was instrumental in moving a nation – Dandi – famous for the march of Mahatma Gandhi who picked up a handful of salt before proclaiming to the British that this salt shall belong to India – the Quit India Movement took shape thereon.

It took a follower of Gandhian principles, Dr. Kalubhai Katubhai Dangar who started a woman based SHG to take on the task of cleaning the hamlet of Dandi and the surrounding areas by collecting trash by doing the rounds door-to-door; segregating

them into bio-degradable and non-degradable, and creating a space to ensure this activity does not fall apart. The initiative is laudable.

For Nainaben, raising three kids was a daunting task. Apart from earning from this venture, the pride of seeing her village clean is immeasurable. She now takes pride in educating others in the village that “cleaning is not a menial job”.

I must admit that Dandi beachfront is inarguably one of the cleanest public beaches in the country.



“

Life in these rural areas is still about bonding over conversations

”



Delight from pulp

Shilpaben Nileshbhai Pandya

Shilpaben Nileshbhai Pandya, who created her own formula for making sherbet (fruit pulp concentrate) created a SHG comprising of simple homemakers in the neighbourhood. With help from Mission Mangalam who provided marketing support and training, business is booming and the SHG makes around 500-600 bottles every day.

Is there a global beverage manufacturer in the making? Only time will tell.

6 flavours

Lemon & ginger

Fennel

Jal-jeera

American ice-cream

Orange

Mango



Catering to the crowd

Kokilaben Makhwana

Cooking comes naturally to Indian women, more so in a rural setting. Turning this talent into a business venture is not natural. Try and tell this to Kokilaben Makhwana and her team who run a canteen service at the local Zilla Parishad office complex. Being the entrepreneur that she is – running a beauty salon at home over the weekends – this transition perhaps came naturally to her.

The SHG she created made women become entrepreneurs and run this canteen successfully taking turns every month. Every member in the SHG is literate enough to read and write, more importantly the confidence they have gained and the appreciation for the food they prepare stands testament to the financial independence they have collectively achieved, even enabling them to send their children to school.





Nursing nature

As we approach the small village of Nenpur in Kheda district, we pass a temple by the roadside; nothing unusual right, especially in India. What struck me was that the offering made to this temple of “Chudel Mata” – a local deity was fascinating. Brand new saris of different colours and variety hung from every brand of every tree around the temple. Villagers, especially women, tie these colourful saris to the branch with the hope of pleasing the deity who is supposed to fulfil their wish if offered with a sari.

What is more fascinating is the story of the SHG (totalling 7 in number) that have an understanding with the forest department to repurchase saplings that have been tended to by the women. The forest department gives seeds to the women and more than 25,000 plants have been replanted or redistributed by the SHG in the area. The SHG also undertakes other seasonal activities like kite-making, garland making apart from involving in part-time farming.

Interestingly, the women who grow saplings in their nursery, overruled by faith were draping the surrounding greenery with colourful garments.



Tidy triumph

New dawn, new surprise!

Located bang in the middle of Ahmedabad, the swanky metropolis, is the Zilla Panchayat office. Every morning – before the office’s official open timings - 11 women in uniform from Devdi, a village 36 km away confidently arrive at their place of work.

As part of the Mission Mangalam initiative; they are professionally trained to manage housekeeping chores including a day-visit

to the Taj Group of Hotels to get an insight into the importance of cleanliness. The SHG members under the name Disha Sakhi Mandal have become a formidable force who undertake housekeeping chores here. The offices are dusted, brushed, wiped clean on a daily basis. With brooms, swabs, brushes, bucket and vacuum cleaners – they go about their duties of cleaning the offices before staff begin arriving.

For Manjulaben, a widow with two boys and the SHG leader, livelihood has changed dramatically from a life of penury to



being recognised as the lady who works in a 'government office in Ahmedabad'. The same goes for the rest of the members who are frequently asked by the villagers to take care of government related work on their behalf.

Homemakers and part-time farm labourers once - some widowed some married to abusive drunkards - working here has given them pride and recognition that they always craved for.



Wafting sticks of **elation**



Gujarat is a state that speaks strongly for the rich culture and traditions that Indians are talked about worldwide. A culture-driven home would welcome you to a serenity of picturesque decorations – a reminder of festive spirit that we must celebrate life every day. An important emblem among them is the subtle scent of the agarbatti (scented incense sticks) filling the rooms cascading an invigorating feeling of belongingness.

I could not help but contain the aroma that the olfactory nerves did to seize the moment I stepped into the Agarbatti production unit.

Tucked away in a remote area, not far from Ahmedabad is Paldi-Kakrej village. Most men work in the nearby city and women belonging to the Durbar community were not allowed to step

out of their homes.

Under the All India Rural Empowerment Programme and Mission Mangalam, Gauriben Raval took the lead and started a SHG drawing other willing members in the neighbourhood into the fold. What started off as a small venture making Agarbatti has grown over the past 3 years to give the SHG a sizable profit and Gauriben and her family a concrete roof over their head.

Now, Gauriben's husband who used to run a village taxi service quit his ideas and now, focuses on transporting the finished product to buyers in neighbouring villages.

A simple task of lighting up this stick every day across villages & town strewn across the state has made an enormous difference to the lives of the people in this village.







Adorning the **arrival**

In traditional Gujarati weddings, the bridegroom arrives on a neatly decorated horse. Look closely and the adornment on the horse is striking.

Maha Kali, the SHG in Alo, a remote village in Ranpur taluka is involved in creating these wonderful adornments that perhaps misses getting equal attention as that of the bridegroom's. A profitable business especially during the wedding season, the SHG and its leader Manjuben Gabrubhai Solanki are certainly not complaining.



Wedding craftsmanship

Not far from this village is Aniyali Kasbati. Malakya Chandrikaben and her SHG Vikas Mahila are involved in making decorative dolls using a variety of materials.

These dolls, once a part of the wedding ensemble and sold only in neighbouring villages, have found their way into the aisles of retail stores in bigger cities. Chandrikaben has extensively travelled around the state and country selling her wares at folk art fairs and exhibitions.

An intricate process, Chandrikaben is now involved in training other members to improve productivity.







“

When a man supports a woman, very few things can stop her ingenuity from coming to the fore

”



Packing strength

Pregnant women, lactating mothers and infants need nutritional supplements more than normal adults. This is a well-established fact. However, in remote villages, people get by with what they have. Stepping in as Mission Mangalam, the state government through SHGs struck upon the idea of providing subsidised nutritional powder as a supplement.

The powdery product, commonly termed as Take-home Ration (THR), is manufactured in power-operated machinery in Wadhwan, a small town in Surendranagar district. Women from the nearby villages of Malodh, Kherali, and Kharwa handle the machinery. The nearly all women factory (with few men as employees) produces 2.5 tonnes of the finished produce every day, a staggering 52 tonnes of production every month.

The feeling of pride is evident in the way the women, mainly married to farmers, go about the process everyday – from punching in their entry time, to confidently



operating machines to packing to despatch to understanding banking and financial dynamics.

More importantly, they are aware that their product is making a difference to many young women in the region.





Threading **fashion**





Skirting the Little Rann of Kutch is a string of hamlets that are involved in stitching "chaniya choli" - what can be termed as the fashion statement for any young women in this region.

In the village of Patadi – just a few kilometres from the

famous Wild Ass Sanctuary – two SHGs, Dharti and Pragati have been involved in this business for many years. The SHGs run a retail store at Patadi apart from distributing their works across the 70 villages strewn around the Little Rann. Profits from the venture are safely banked and used within the SHG members during financial emergencies.





Grandeur of scale



Enthralling globetrotters and tourists from India and abroad, The Rann Utsav, held every year in Dhordo, Kutch is also a pedestal for the craftsmen to showcase and sell their work.

Mission Mangalam stretches its aid and provides SHGs from every corner of Gujarat a platform to exhibit their work in many trade-fairs across India apart from a presence at the Rann Utsav.

Exposure to local and international buyers improves exposure to the artefacts and products the SHGs create, enhancing the potential to earn more for their wares.





Savouring a **dream**

Mayaben Nimawat



Gujarat and good food are synonymous. At every turn, one cannot miss the chaai (tea) stall or a small restaurant offering sumptuous cuisine. Snacking is a favourite pastime and preparing snacks or accompaniments during a meal is a well refined art, mastered by every Gujarati lady.

Khakhra – a favourite snack made from dough, baked, and laced with spices, herbs and flavourings, is a huge business.

Mayaben Nimawat used to work, sometimes as a housemaid, at times as a helper in a factory in the village of Pardi near Rajkot. She even got associated with the World Health Organization (WHO) as an outreach worker explaining the ill-effect of HIV/AIDS to women workers in industrialized zones. Amidst this period of financial burden and insecurity, she managed to complete her education up to the 10th grade.

Her experience of working with women and the advent of Mission Mangalam sparked her interest in forming a SHG. Renowned for her prowess of making Khakhras in different flavours, Mayaben along with 15 of the SHG members started preparing Khakhras to the world from her humble home; and they currently churn out 90 kg everyday.

The confidence this venture has brought has inspired her to rope in more women from neighbouring villages and one day, she hopes to expand the business of making this scrumptious snack into a large enterprise.





Papad **palate**

The ubiquitous accompaniment during any Gujarati meal is the humble 'papad'.

Passing through the town of Ghondal, I wonder how the royal family of the region reigned during their time especially with arched bridges and buildings resembling the likes of Westminster Abbey. Reaching the village of Roopavati - dominated by the Durbar community - where women were restricted to the confines of their homes - I was amazed at the ingenuity of the SHG that is involved in preparing Lijjat brand of papads from the confines of their homes. Dough from Lijjat arrives in the morning and the finished product is collected a day later.

The profits made by the SHG has helped the women here become aware of banking services and financial prudence, giving them a sense of inclusion and independence.





Powder power



Mission Mangalam's initiative of providing nutritional supplements to the needy is spreading far and wide across the state. In the village of Supedi in Dhoraji taluka, the manufacturing unit has been in operation for almost a year producing 2.1 tonne of the product every day.

It has significantly changed the lives of the SHG members here, more notably Rasheedaben who lost her husband in 2012 in a tragic railway accident. With two kids to raise, Rasheedaben had to shoulder the responsibility alone. With the commissioning of this unit, fate took a turn for the better and she is now able to provide for her children's educational needs.



Broadening horizons



Legend has it that the Portuguese supplied labourers from East Africa to the Nawab of Junagadh after his return from there – the entourage that arrived never returned to their homeland. A small section of this African community – called Siddhi – reside in the villages that scout the fringes of the Gir National Park, more famous for its resident population of Asiatic Lions.

The population in the villages of Jamboor, Madhupur and Sirwaan are predominantly that of Siddhi origin. Integrated well into the local way of life, the community speak in Gujarati and follow most Gujarati customs, though retaining a few of their original ones.

Jahidaben Ajith Makhwan, an unassuming lady has taken up the task of teaching young children from these villages – the first steps of a structured education.

124 kids of all age groups have been under her wings at some point in time over the past 3 years.



Sweetening success



Cane sugar extract, the elixir to satiate the sweet tooth is a major cash crop in and around the remote villages of Madhupur near Sasan Gir. Multiple SHGs have together invested in purchasing machinery for crushing cane – juice extract – the primary source in preparing “jaggery”. The SHG members also partake in making this product. They also avail a share of the bonus and profits which are accrued from the sale of jaggery, sold in well-packaged containers.



A real pathfinder

Valiben Bhimabhai

Married off very young to a man with hearing and speech disabilities, Valiben Bhimabhai had to literally fight her battles silently. She worked as a farm labourer and single-handedly took care of every household needs, until she learnt of Mission Mangalam and the training opportunities they offer.

She enrolled for training with every opportunity she got, from making leather bags, embroidery, tailoring, beauty parlour courses to making agarbatti, she learnt it all.

Gaining in self-confidence, Valiben has now reined in women from her village and neighbouring ones to start the SHG, Arman Sakhi Mandal. Now, she imparts the knowledge that she has obtained through her hard work apart from assisting them in official work matters.



Moulding life

Hansaben Rajeshbhai Baweliya

You make a person how to fish and she will never have to go hungry. The RSETI training institutes strewn across the length and breadth of the state does exactly this.

While Mission Mangalam throws up opportunities for women to get trained on various aspects, changing lives and improving livelihood, it is up to the individual to make maximum use of this opportunity.

Meet Hansaben Rajeshbhai Baweliya, a mother of four (2 boys and 2 girls). To alleviate her financial situation, she underwent training at the RSETI, took up tailoring, putting herself on the road to financial independence. She can break into a smile easily now, she confided.











Healing **traditionally**

Kariben Uzma Saalan Majgul

Kariben Uzma Saalan Majgul is the SHG leader of the group Deep Sakhi Mandal from Madhupur. Learning's from her ancient forefathers helps her prepare traditional medicines, mainly balms and pain relieving oils from natural extracts. The products are sold in the local market and the group is able to invest in a revolving fund, providing financial relief and prudence.





Sweeping glory

Surprises never cease to end. Back in the once princely town of Junagadh, the sprawling Government office building housing the offices of the Collector, the Superintendent of Police and other officials, leaves me astonished.

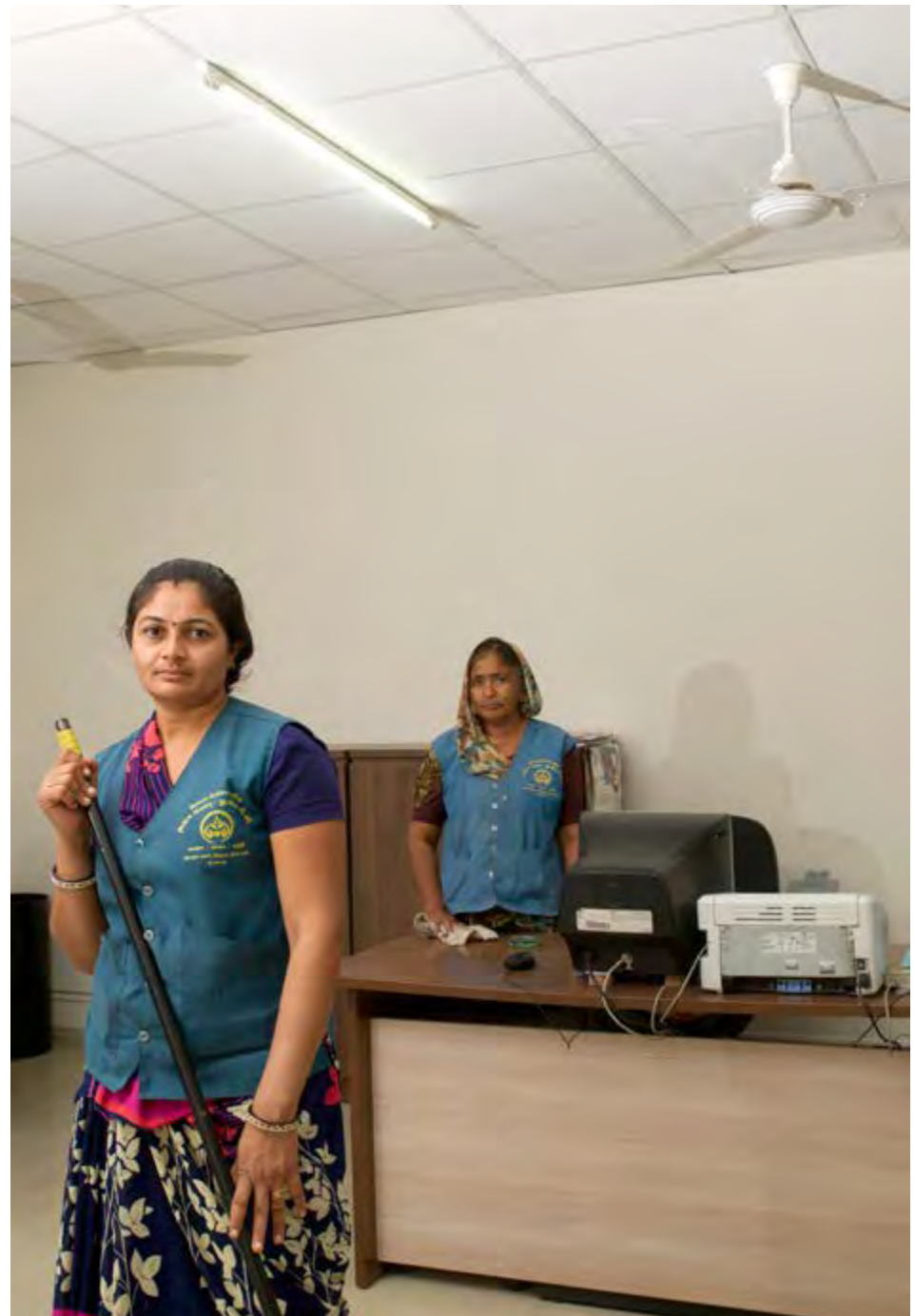
Entering, I find the place clean and well kept. In stride a bevy of uniformed women with cleaning equipment as their arsenal. Brooms, swabs, vacuum cleaners and buckets are unleashed to clean out any grime, dust or speck that wafts to their discountenance.

With a workforce of 50 women from different SHGs working in various government offices in Junagadh, this is arguably the only place in the country with such a professional workforce consisting of only women from SHGs.

Mission Mangalam opened up this opportunity that broke apart the shackles of prejudice towards this community of cleaners. After imparting training in the nuances of cleaning methods, even taking them on a one-day outdoor session at a five-star hotel chain to witness how a sparklingly clean environment can be maintained.

Battling reluctance, doubt and overcoming non-cooperation from the working staff, the professional service has been in vogue for the past two years. Having overcome this initial battle, the SHGs have become a force to reckon with. Now, more and more women from neighbouring villages enquire about the service and how they could enrol to undertake working a high profile government office.

Apart from destroying societal beliefs, the women here have shown resolve and charisma to glamorize a job once thought to be menial.





Restoring **pride**

Neetaben Kishorebhai Solanki

Meet Neetaben Kishorebhai Solanki, a widow from Padaria village who used to work as a farm labourer in neighbouring farms. She lost her husband few years ago to AIDS; not just this, she herself contracted the deadly virus and is now HIV+ve. With a son and a daughter to take care of, the responsibilities of managing the household rests firmly on her shoulders.

Not succumbing to the stigma associated with being HIV+ve, Neetaben has displayed exemplary courage and resolve to be a leader amongst her peers, even encouraging them to take up membership in SHGs and follow the path to becoming socially and economically independent.



Beads of hope

Heading off north from Junagadh, driving through narrow country roads, we arrive at the village of Shiyal in Bavala taluka.

A tribal village comprising mainly of the Padhar community, they are primarily involved in making high quality stuffed decorative dolls. This primitive tribal group are experts in this art and have been practising it for many years. With the introduction of Mission Mangalam, a structure was put forth with the creation of a SHG. With better access to raw material, transportation of finished goods and exposure to various marketing outlets, the collective earning capacity of the group has bettered, improving livelihood standards.

With the confidence gained after seeing their products reach bigger cities like Ahmedabad and Vadodara, the women who were never exposed to the concept of schooling are now enrolling their children in special PTG schools.











Undoing the waste

Kiranben

The spirit of entrepreneurship can strike at any time. Kiranben, the leader of the SHG hit upon the idea of opening a retail outlet right next door to the famous religious temple of Bechraji in Mehsana district. She began to stock products that were made by members of her SHG. With village fairs conducted almost on a weekly basis in the region around the temple, there is no dearth for customers.

The product the SHG make is quite interesting. Artefacts are made by intricately weaving strands of coir. The coir as a raw material is obtained from the temple itself – a by-product from breaking the coconut, which is presented as an offering to the deity – keeps the group busy.

During Ganesh Chaturthi and on Sundays and Poonashtmi – sales peak to levels that makes these women find hard to address.



Different abilities

Jignyasa Jayantiben Joshi

Amidst this intertwined mesh of coir, a reticent lady - a graduate in Sanskrit - is engrossed in her creation of a coir-laced doll. When quizzed, she opens up to reveal a story of overcoming physical deformities to lead a life of self-sufficiency and dignity.

Afflicted with polio from birth and physically challenged, no one offered her a job because of this disability. Jayantiben Joshi was subjected to abject social discrimination for no fault of hers.

She now has formed her own SHG of handicapped women – Sholak Mission Mandal. Even though she cannot physically stand on her feet, through her grit and focused determination, she has revealed that you don't need to stand up to be noticed.





Diversity in skills

Nestled in a quaint corner on the outskirts of Mehsana is Ramosana village. The ingenuity of the SHG is beyond comprehension. In the open backyard of Taraben Prabhatji Thakur, washing powder for utensils and bathrooms, cold-cream, lip-balm and coir mats are manufactured perhaps making some of the big chemical conglomerates to blush.

What were the families doing earlier? Brewing illicit liquor!

With Mission Mangalam's support, they have completely switched over to manufacturing these cleaning agents.

Now, they supply their end products to general hospitals, schools, colleges and government offices on a regular basis. With the accrued profits, they have purchased a vehicle for efficient and timely delivery.

Taraben has now quit her earlier job of a housemaid, has sent her sons to attend college and is currently aiding her daughter-in-law's college education. Her relationship with the daughter-in-law is more like that of a daughter – she proudly proclaims, apart from allowing her to even experiment with the modern fashion, otherwise forbidden in the village.







New fragrance to life

The SHG at the Kamana village is an ebullient mix of women who have broken the barriers of caste and discrimination of the untouchable community, now involved in making agarbatti together, for sale in nearby markets.

They take pride in what they make and have even invested in an automated machine that produces over 50 kg every day. With increase in production capacity and the SHG growing in confidence, the group is now planning on building on this success.





Reversing destiny

Passing through the village of Khasa on the highway to Visnagar, it is but hard to miss noticing the ubiquitous Mangalam Amul Parlour that are mushrooming across the state after a MOU was signed between Mission Mangalam and Anand Milk Union Ltd., (Amul) during the Vibrant Gujarat summit in 2013.

The SHG, Vedika Sakhi Mandal under the stewardship of Arunaben Vishnubai Patel successfully runs one such parlour. They meet here often and even take turns to manage the counter on a daily basis.

What do they do when they are not busy managing the parlour is more interesting to say the least.

They provide clean potable drinking water to the entire village!

The Reverse Osmosis (RO) plant that was commissioned few years ago was operated and managed (or should I say mismanaged) by the village Sarpanch. The women of the SHG were tired of this service – irregular supply of water, poor maintenance leading to frequent stoppage of service and abject disregard to the citizens needs – made them take up the cudgels themselves.

Vedika Sakhi Mandal took over the responsibility of operating and managing this service and within six months, they effected a turnaround that is laudable. Almost 3,000 litres of water is sold everyday. The RO plant is maintained well, SHG members take turns to keep it open and going by the number of people who queue up to fill their 20 litre bottles with potable water, it is a sight to behold.

Kudos to women power who toppled the top man for his indifferent approach and are now the apple of the eye of a community no longer plagued by inefficiency.

Now, doesn't this remind us of the story that Subhadraaben stitched together for her patch work creation.











Bidding goodbye to this land is a sign that I will be retracing my steps here, to renew my experiences and to be cradled in the fresh folklores that people will always have to share.

During the course of this journey, I have documented a mere countable efforts of the women from some of the rural hinterlands. These are just a bird's-eye view of the innumerable chronicles making a titanic difference to the lives of thousands

of others spread across the state.

In entirety, for you and me, this shall be a reminder of the unsung songs of nerve that women are showing. It is a reminder that no woman - and by that - no woman notwithstanding her background should be undermined or shunned to illogical beliefs in times where radical thoughts make way to openness and inclusion.