

A Paper

“Peace building by improved access to water and sanitation for women and men in Gujarat after communal riots”.



Conflicts over Water and Water to Solve Conflicts
Gender Water Alliance

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About Utthan : Founded in 1981 by four professional women Utthan's first interventions were directed at initiating sustainable processes of empowerment among vulnerable communities to struggle for their basic rights. Utthan's journey in development began in Bhal, one of the most resource-poor regions of the state and infamously known as *napaania* or waterless. Here, Utthan initiated and facilitated the emergence of a community-based group known as *Mabiti* which became an independent organization and has been a local force since 1994. The initiation was through a women's movement around accessing their right to regular safe drinking water; a movement which challenged patriarchy and feudal exploitation, caste discrimination at the local levels and centralized, non community inclusive policies and programs at the government level.



Since 1994, Utthan continued the process of organizing the most marginalized communities around their rights and assisting in the formation of gender sensitive and people-centred local institutions, federations in the coastal (Bhavnagar and Amreli districts) and tribal (Dahod and Panchmahals districts) areas. It has supported the building of a movement of women and other vulnerable groups interlinking with other human rights issues, such as Violence against women, communalism, livelihood security etc. that will enhance their income base and improve the quality of life.,

Over the years Utthan has influenced policies and programs, through partnerships and networks at state, national, international levels such as Pravah, GWA, WSSCC (WASH), GWP, and many others. This has been made possible through the development of a knowledgeable and dedicated team with long years of experience of working with communities, the most vulnerable in particular. The major focus areas have been **Gender and empowerment**, **Livelihood security** through aspects of bio diversity, disaster preparedness and Integrated Natural Resource management in the context of manmade and natural disasters, as well as **Peace and justice** through **conflict transformation** and efforts to ensure human rights.

Context : Since 1980s in particular, the policy environment India and Gujarat specifically has been that of centralized, supply driven efforts in drinking water and sanitation, industrial and economic growth *at any cost* leading to severe environmental damages, stagnancy in agriculture and also lowering of per capita incomes in agriculture. These changes and policies like the Special Economic Zones, Coastal Regulation Zones, corporatisation of wastelands etc. have already started (and will increase in the future) affecting peoples' livelihood security and eroding resources like land for example, adversely impacting on the most vulnerable, increasing conflicts and burden on women. At Utthan, what is evident for us is that within this complex interplay of adverse socio-economic-political conditions, there is the need to strengthen our initiatives with the 'critical mass'

Although sanitation is a multidimensional issue, by the year 2000, just 15% of India's rural population was covered with sanitation facilities. (WaterAid India: 2005) The estimate of 500 million Indians without basic sanitation in 2015 – even after Millennium Development Goals (MDG) achievement – is a spectacular example of watsan failure. (Chatterjee: 2006) The brighter side of Gujarat State is its image as one of the prosperous and industrially developed states in India but the darker side is its lower ranking on the human development index, especially gender development, communal violence and water scarcity that leads to problems of health. Government of Gujarat launched a scheme of awards for villages that achieve total sanitation but no individual or no village has been awarded during the year 2005-06. This signifies the present scenario of sanitation facilities in Gujarat.

Challenging patriarchy, feudalism, centralized systems, through gender sensitive, community centered alternatives for safe drinking water and sanitation security

In 1981, Utthan team witnessed violent fights amongst communities in the coastal Gujarat, trying to access half a pot of dirty water for survival, that would trickle down from the long distance pipeline, in an open underground tank. To prevent serious violence amongst men, communities in some of the villages decided to only permit women to access water as their struggle would be less violent than men! Situational analysis and Organising women's groups

around this issue led to women and communities demanding decentralised rainwater harvesting in lined pond, roof water tanks and recharging the ground water. For a strong organisation, women themselves had to fight their own discriminatory attitude towards socially lower caste communities. But strong women leaders from different communities demonstrated this change and challenged the casteism, patriarchy and feudalism. State's (Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board) resistance to women's demand of decentralise water system, led to strengthening of women's organisation to bring about this power change.



Strong resistance from the families, society or efforts to 'use' women's strength while keeping them on the periphery or exclude them from various processes of decision making and growth has been experienced widely. Vahliben, Katuben, (from Mingalpur village), Baluben, Monghiben from Nesvad, Salma, Sajida, Laxmiben from tribal areas, all have suffered violence and obstacles from their men in the family or sexual abuse from the landlords, whenever they have stepped out of their homes to take the leadership to speak on the issue of water and sanitation or other, protest and negotiate with government officials, mobilize the community to raise their voice to demand their right and justice. But some of them through their women's groups at the village and area levels (Sammarthan Mahila

Sangathan, Mahila Vikas sangathan, Vanita shakti sangathan and Ekta sangathan in tribal area) and have slowly been able to enforce and influence the change in the patriarchal attitude., at different levels. Strategically, in many cases women have successfully negotiated with their men folks to support them fight against some of the issues like feudalism, corruption, their non exclusion in planning and implementing process of some of the development programs, etc.. eg men have joined women's efforts to combat violence against women in the Bhavnagar, Amreli districts and for communal harmony in Panchmahal and Dahod districts. Women's savings and credit initiative and the struggle for other livelihood security such as food, fodder, seeds, fuel, health, education etc. have lent strength to the sustainability women's organizations and the initiatives taken up by them, clearly establishing its interdependence and linkages. Once women had water security, a strong demand for safe sanitation was also voiced by them.

The process of empowerment through preparing the women and men from the vulnerable sections of the society to understand and prioritise their options for change also involved an assessment of the sector itself from a gender perspective- looking at processes, structures, institutions. It involved confronting social and cultural norms and challenging power structures within family, community and local governance. .. Innovative demonstrations in disaster adaptive strategies, conservation of biodiversity, establishing conflict resolution mechanisms, better co operations, new forms of institutions to address the present micro and macro environment campaigns, partnership and advocacy from local to international level have been identified as an important strategy for achieving desirable changes. Two national level decentralised programs, Swajaldhara for drinking water and Total Sanitation Campaign were launched post 2002, for the rural areas.

Communal conflict 2002 and peace building process

2002 Communal Violence: It is now acknowledged that the communal violence inflicted on the Muslim community, on women and girls in particular, in Gujarat in 2002 was unprecedented not only in terms of its spread, intensity and brutality in India's post partition history but also the complicity of the state government. With over 3500 losing their lives, over two lakhs internally displaced, properties and livelihoods destroyed, and, according to conservative estimates, over 300 women sexually assaulted and killed in public. various civil society organizations came forward to assist in relief, rehabilitation, preparing fact finding reports,



forming peoples' tribunals, platforms, sharing information, analyzing the events. The National Human Rights Commission and Minorities Commission pointed to the failure of the state and central government in carrying out its constitutional obligation of protecting life and liberty of all its citizens.

The challenge for UTTHAN working in Dahod and Panchmahal districts (conflict affected area) was to develop an organizational understanding of the issue, even as there was an urgent need to consider how the conflict affected daily life of the Muslim community and to respond to the same. We observed that post violence, there was a marked difference in power relationship between the Muslim and adivasi, Hindu community. Eg. Muslim women standing in the water queue at the hand pump would easily be bypassed by others pushing them back, recalling the violence that had taken place. Always men had to accompany Muslim women when they went for defecation in the woods as they were extremely fearful of sexual violence. With resurgence of patriarchal attitude within the Muslim families, women were confined to indoors. Aware of the risks posed to the women and men involved in addressing the same, the risk to the Muslim community, Muslim women, UTTHAN staff, the only option was to enhance the peace building process and strengthen support at the grassroots level. While the impulse to move forward came from the affected Muslim community, the challenge was to design strategies to prevent the prevailing deep divides among the communities turning into a communal conflict- by mainstreaming peace across all its training, institution building and programs. From the beginning, it was evident to Utthan, its staff, that the conflict transformation process in Dahod and conflict prevention in Bhavnagar and Amreli is a fragile process and will have to be built on the core values upheld by the organization- of gender equality, diversity, equity, social justice and by a team that understood the conflict in all its dimensions.

Conflict Transformation and peace process through water and sanitation : Above analysis and based on our



previous experience, Utthan started organizing women from different communities (Muslims, hindu, adivasi, dalit) together on some of their common issues. Even though with distrust and fear women came together for their priority issues. Facilitation processes led to the group of women from about 8 villages, to start providing interest free loan to some of the most vulnerable conflict affected Muslim families for sanitation. They planned that after few rounds, the loan will be converted into a common loan that could be given to women from other communities, for sanitation. Simultaneously, Muslim women expressed their need for water security, which was also the need of the Hindu, adivasi or dalit women. Negotiation, in terms of where the water source would be, norms to use it, how will they jointly control to ensure no injustice is done, maintenance etc. were worked out. Then

they felt that it was important to build safe bathing places for women. A women's group emerged called 'Ekta sangathan' of mix communities. They together built 10 sources for drinking water, some 250 toilets and 3 bathing places.

Initially, because of the rift, women from muslim and other communities would use the facilities at different times. Leaders from the mix communities, started working on the issue to reduce the fear. Interest free loans for sanitation is now being revolved only for the vulnerable single women along with the Muslim women. While women from adivasi and dalits communities have been helped by the group to access funds from various government Schemes available for them.

Ekta Sangathan, Vanita Shakti Maha Sangathan, Sammathan Mahila Sangathan, Mahila Vikas Sangathan have continued their quest and struggle for justice and peace through addressing other issues and promote its approach and strategy for peace at various levels. Some of these have been mainstream peace from feminist perspective and build resistance to any type of fundamentalism, organising and strengthen groups and improve understanding of constitutional, religious and fundamental rights, engage youth for pro active actions for peace and justice, mainstream secular education, strengthen interdependent of livelihood activities, setting up gender and youth Resource centres, linking up and building solidarity.