

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335339435>

We shall Overcome! Stories of Struggles of the Villagers and of Interventions by an NGO

Book · August 2019

CITATIONS

0

READS

345

1 author:



[Alka Parikh](#)

Centre for Field Learning

54 PUBLICATIONS 100 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

We shall Overcome!

Stories of Struggles of the Villagers and
of Interventions by an NGO

Edited by: Alka Parikh

2019

Published by Walnut Publication
#172, K8, Kalinga Nagar, Bhubaneswar – 751013, India
www.walnutpublication.com

Copyright © Author, 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

This book has been published with all reasonable efforts taken to make the material error-free after the consent of the author. The author of this book is solely responsible and liable for its content including but not limited to the views, representations, descriptions, statements, information, opinions and references [“Content”]. The publisher does not endorse or approve the Content of this book or guarantee the reliability, accuracy or completeness of the Content published herein. The publisher and the author make no representations or warranties of any kind with respect to this book or its contents. The author and the publisher disclaim all such representations and warranties, including for example warranties of merchantability and educational or medical advice for a particular purpose. In addition, the author and the publisher do not represent or warrant that the information accessible via this book is accurate, complete or current.

ISBN: xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Price ₹xxx

First Published in July 2019

Dedicated to

Nafisaben Barot, Babubhai Prajapati, Nareshbhai Jadhav
and the whole team at Limkheda for tirelessly working in a
difficult terrain and society

About the Authors

Alka Parikh is a Professor at Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology (DAIICT).

Mudra Desai, Chhavi Pareek, Geet Patel, Smeet Jani and Ketul Solanki are the B.Tech students at DAIICT.

Contents

Background: <i>Ketul Solanki</i>	1
Managing to Cope with Any Situation: <i>Alka Parikh</i>	4
Some people never say die: <i>Mudra Desai</i>	9
Not a Fairy Tale: <i>Smeet Jani</i>	13
The Marathon Runner: <i>Geet Patel</i>	16
Age is just a number: <i>Chhavi Pareek</i>	19
Tower of Strength: <i>Alka Parikh</i>	22
The Innovator: <i>Geet Patel</i>	25
The Altruist: Chhavi Pareek	27
Soldiers of Peace: <i>Alka Parikh</i>	30

Background

Ketul Solanki

Dhanpur was very underdeveloped till 1990s. There were no roads. It was very difficult to travel from one village to another. People were extremely poor and socially backward. The rate of migration and malnutrition were very high. They were able to take an agricultural crop only for the monsoon season. Most of the population was uneducated. Thefts were very common and the law and order was almost non-existent.

Utthan entered in 1995 here to help in uplifting the area. Initially, it faced a lot of challenges. People didn't believe in them. They had a fear that Utthan had come to cheat them. As if that was not enough, a rumour started growing in the villages that the people from Utthan are Christians and they want the villagers to convert to Christianity. The members of Gram Panchayat used to oppose them a lot because they were trying to bring awareness among the masses. They believed that with the invasion of an NGO, they would stop getting the benefits of government. It took a lot of time for Utthan to create an atmosphere of trust among the villagers.

Also, when Utthan approached them with some program, villagers would not accept it immediately. So Utthan decided to talk to some progressive people of the villages, make them understand the benefits of the program, and asked them to take these messages to the villagers. Thus from the very beginning, the approach was of community ownership. Their village partners were supported by Utthan by arranging video shows, meetings, campaigns, etc. Thus slowly an

environment of trust was created and more and more people started joining them.

Initially Utthan concentrated on saving groups. Self Help Groups (SHGs) created a platform where all the women gather and not only discuss about the savings but also about social or individual problems without any kind of hesitation and fear. So along with the savings, a close relationship among these women developed that helped them later in fighting for many issues.

Utthan also identified people who were capable of providing leadership and gave them the role of organizing the villagers together. Efforts were also made to make government schemes reach the villagers and get them those benefits. Utthan worked on human rights of the people, women empowerment, gender equality, migration, food security, horticulture etc.

Within a few years of Utthan's entry, government started the project of watershed in the drought-prone areas. Utthan was selected to be the implementing agency for that project in these villages. Many watersheds thus have been built in this area by Utthan. It got other funding agencies also to invest in this venture. Watershed changed the lives of the villagers. Their agriculture productivity increased considerably. With that, they could afford better food, better houses, milch cattle, and other household assets. Migration reduced. People started sending their children to school.

There were times when Utthan didn't have enough money to continue with its work. Once, Utthan reduced the salary of their staff to 50%. Later, Utthan could not give salary to its staff for 3 months. The notable thing is that, the staff still continued working. Such was the dedication of the team.

The kind of work Utthan is doing makes us believe that humanity still exists. These are the unsung heroes of our country who are building strong foundations for development. We salute their spirit.

Managing to Cope with Any Situation

Alka Parikh

Shanta was the youngest child in the family. She had an elder brother, Shanu and elder sister, Sita. Shanta was just a baby when her mother fell ill. Sita had to be withdrawn from school. Sita was just nine, in third standard and loved school a lot. But there was no choice. But she was a mature child. She quietly buried her hopes and took up the responsibility of the house. When Shanta was five, Sita insisted she should go to school. "I would look after all the house work but let at least my sister study". Shanta started school under the warm support of Sita and studied all the way upto the tenth standard. Hardly any girl in the neighbourhood was so educated. Shanta was a happy child.

In her community, girls are married off by the age of 15. So search for a suitable boy began. A family was found where the father of the boy was a school teacher and the boy had education till 10th. "These are educated people; they will value Shanta. And the boy would be taking up a good salaried job in Dahod town; our daughter would not have to live in the heat and dust of the village. She would have a good life'. Thinking thus, they selected Jitendra as Shanta's lifemate. With dreams of an urban existence, Shanta stepped into the married life. It was fun to be in a town, the experience was so different! And the husband was also very understanding and supportive. The new life seemed promising.

But Mohanlal, Shanta's father-in-law, had different plans for them. Since he was a school teacher and lived in Dahod, he wanted someone to look after the agricultural land in the village. Shanta and Jitendra wanted to stay in Dahod but he forced them to go to Agashvaani. The

couple, married for just 4-5 months, had to head for the village. Upon reaching, Shanta discovered that the “family house”, so proudly talked by her father-in-law, was a half broken kachcha house. The land was six acres but in a semi-arid region. There was no water; agriculture could be done only during monsoon. The land was not very fertile, the productivity was also low. They could take just the monsoon crop.

They braced up for such existence. Jitendra started tailoring in addition to agriculture. But the income was meagre. They had four children. They could not even afford to educate them so pleaded with Mohanlal to admit them in Dahod School. Mohanlal agreed but neither he nor his wife was very nice to the grandchildren. Every time the parents visited Dahod, the kids would cry and cry and plead to them that they should be taken back home. But the couple had no choice. Children had to be educated and so in spite of all difficulties; they have to stay at Dahod only.

Life was going on like this, when one day some social workers came to the village. They said that they are coming from Utthan. The villagers directed them to Shantaben, saying that she is one of the most educated ladies in the village. Shantaben formed an instant bond with the Utthan people. She went around with them in the village, and helped them in forming a saving group. Eventually, Shantaben was elected as the president of the saving group.

Now Shantaben would call meetings, collect money from the members, find out the details of their loan requirements...suddenly she found her feet! The person who used to be scared to go even to Dahod alone, was going to the bank to deposit money, was going to various places for training, for exposure tours...she was growing. She could now speak confidently in meetings, explain the loan details to the bank officers and saving group members. They even got loans from nationalized banks

and she learnt how to calculate interest and monthly instalments. She was a changed person.

Utthan started watershed construction. Jitendra joined Utthan as a field supervisor. He and Shantaben started working closely with Utthan. As water levels increased with the watershed, they managed to get two crops a year instead of one. First they used to have only maize and tur daal. Now they grow paddy also. In winter, now they can take another crop – they are growing wheat and chana (chick peas). The technique of cultivation also improved. They used to spread urea everywhere in whatever quantity; with Utthan they learnt organic farming. Expenditure on unessential inputs was saved. Tractors and threshers came to village and all farmers started renting them in. With all these changes, productivity increased by 50%. Income started flowing in.

Utthan brought in Wadi project for women. Shantaben actively participated in it, she nurtured the wadi. She would bring buckets of water manually to the land and water the plants. She made the fruit trees grow tall. Wadi started bringing in income every month instead of every agriculture season. Incomes increased further.

Now you visit Shantaben and Jitubhai and you find a large pucca house (Mohanlal had also chipped in money here but the loan of Rs one lakh came from Shantaben's saving group). There is a motor bike, thanks to the job with Utthan. A cow, a buffalo and some goats were bought. With her increased skill set, Shantaben was able to get the job of the ASHA worker and brings home Rs 5000 every month. Now there is no need to keep the children with the grandparents, she brought the younger children home and gets them educated from the village. Both husband and wife are widely respected in not just Agashvaani but all the surrounding villages. They are known to everyone. Life flowered.



Unfortunately, all good fortunes did not last for long. Mohanlal retired and came back to the village. He claimed his share in the house. Took back his bullocks and cow. And claimed his rights over all the land, taking away the improved fields and even the wadi. At the same time, Jitubhai's project ended at Utthan. He thus lost his job. With most of the assets gone, the house now runs only on Shantaben's income. They are in trouble again.

But this is a couple that never says die. They applied for vermi-composting project with the forest department and now have 6 large vermi-compost pits. The members of the saving group look after this project and are expecting to start earning Rs. 200 per bag of 30 kg. Each cycle of 45 days is expected to bring at least Rs. 200-400 per member. The solar water pump has also been installed with Utthan's efforts. They can now sell that water to others.

Shantaben is the main ‘manager’ in the house. She has acquired good financial understanding through her role as saving group president. She is planning to sell the buffalo and rent in a room close to the highway. There she is planning to start a tailoring shop by Jitubhai and her own tailoring classes. Some unused sewing machines are lying with them, she wants to make good use of them. Salute to this empowered Shantaben and to Utthan for giving her this confidence.

Some people never say die!

Mudra Desai

Although we say we live in the 21st century and we assume or believe women have equal rights, but somewhere we have to admit that they need support. Support to stand up. Support to have a say in the society. And when we talk about villages the mindset that women are inferior has prevailed over centuries. Yet some women stand up on their own, to find their space and freedom, to show that they are not weak rather strong enough to protect themselves and those they care about. They prove how against all odds in a male dominated society they manage to raise a voice.

Ratniben a resident of Bhorva is one such lady. The village itself lies in one of the poorest regions of Gujarat. Married at an early age, she led a peaceful life in the village with her husband. They had a small farm just beside the house. The land was infertile and deforestation had led to decreased rainfall. Determined to rise above poverty, Ratniben and her husband worked quite hard. With the passage of time, Ratniben became a mother to two children: a girl, and a boy. In spite of their poverty and lack of education, they persevered to send their children to school.

Utthan, an NGO working for the welfare and social upliftment of people, had recently visited the village with a proposal to start wadi program and teach them the proper ways of vegetable cultivation. Ratniben was advised to cultivate the 0.75 acres of land beside her house as wadi. At first, she was hesitant to change the cropping pattern but after some persuasion, she agreed. She worked hard with a constant fear that if the project failed she might not have enough food for the coming years to survive. During the time that the saplings were

growing, Ratniben earned a decent income from beekeeping for 2 years. Her beekeeping job was greatly appreciated by the fellow villagers. It brought many visitors from around the area. Alongside, she married off her daughter and son. Owing to her hard work over the years, she finally led a decent life.

But it was not long before she had to confront problems that disrupted her peaceful life. Her relatives conspired against her to get hold of the wadi which was a major source of livelihood for Ratniben. They started finding ways to capture it. Due to poor education, villagers often fall into the trap of irrationalism and believe in occultists. The relatives used this concept well and spread rumors in the village that Ratniben was a witch with the help of a local occultist. Ratniben was stunned but she thought it would be fine after some days. But it did not end soon.

When she did not give attention to these things, they came home one night and started pelting stones at the house. Fortunately, she was not present at home but her husband had to bear the brunt of this and was left with a broken jaw. She reported the case to the police and started a legal petition for the same. The episode soon turned into the worst nightmare. Because of these injuries, they could not cultivate the land well that year and had no money left. She even had to borrow milk to feed her husband. To add to the rising miseries, her son-in-law married her brother-in-law's daughter and left her daughter with a baby girl to Ratniben's house.

Ratniben filed a case for her daughter's divorce. The villagers started criticizing her saying she was fighting her own husband's brother. But she would not be deterred. She stood up for her daughter's right to divorce. She had to borrow money to buy food for her daughter and her child. Since her son was an alcoholic and his family did not bring

any income, Ratniben had to look after his family too. The son kept harassing her and her daughter; she had to tackle that also regularly. There were many hardships but she fought on.

The brother-in-law incited other villagers and they all came to beat her. She called the police straight away. The police dispersed the crowd with a warning of strict action if it was to happen again. Usually in villages, it is often difficult to get support from police but Ratniben managed it.

Despite being stuck in this feud, she began cultivating the land again. She knew it was a long way to go. Meanwhile, her daughter found a suitable partner and got married, leaving her daughter with Ratniben.

Ratniben sent her grandchildren to school and was determined to educate them to a higher level. Fortunately, at that time, she won the case for her wadi land and got rid of her nudging relatives forever.

She initiated talks with the local self-help groups that were founded by Utthan for support. Through the self-help groups (SHGs) she learnt to manufacture organic fertilizers and started selling them in the neighbouring areas. At this age, she also took loans from the SHG to expand her farm. She is regularly paying back the instalments. Her grandchildren are now going to school, she earns enough for them all through wadi and selling manure. The ship of life has steadied again and it is smooth sailing now.

Even at an old age, Ratniben works hard to pave a way through a life of poverty and misery. Her life is an inspiration to all the women who are deprived of their basic rights. We cannot fail to appreciate Ratniben's constant determination and efforts to fight against all the

evils that exist in our society till date. Nation is proud of strong women like her.

Not A Fairy Tale

Smeet Jani

Along the Sajoi-Dudhamali road, in Dudhamali village, we stopped at a small ordinary shop, the types of which were plenty on that road. Out came a very skinny looking 50 year old woman, greeting us with warmth. She offered us some water and we started chatting. As such nothing looked extra-ordinary about this shop or about her. We talked for a few minutes and then she took us behind the shop to the fields.

There was a very beautiful wadi of flowers adjoining a well. The colorfulness of the wadi gave a different sense of calm to me. Besides the Fulwadi was another field that was used for growing other crops. The Fulwadi was not something very large. But the story of grit and perseverance behind small Fulwadi smelled just as lovely as you would feel standing in the Mughal gardens of Delhi.

The woman I am talking about here is Chanchiben Patel from Dudhamali village. She hails from another small village named Khirkhai in Dahod. Born to a father working in railways, she had 4 brothers and 3 sisters. None of the sisters were educated. She was married to a man in Dudhamali village at an age of 20.

For about 30 years she and her husband used to migrate for a few months to cities like Surat for some manual labour work (like digging borewells, etc.). This was because the income from agriculture could sustain them only for half the year. For the other half of the year they had to depend on the income earned through labour work.

Things changed when Utthan came in their life. The NGO formed small 'Sangathans' or Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in different villages for

the development of women in that region. Chanchiben joined the ‘Sangathan’ in her region and started contributing 100 rupees per month in it. Under the wadi program, Utthan provided her with bamboos and fences to grow a fruit and vegetables garden. They also provided her with different seeds of various vegetables. Chanchiben also went for a 3-day training program to learn about different agricultural techniques.

But to her disappointment, in the very first year after she planted the seeds, everything was ruined by cyclone. She also started bee-keeping with the help of Utthan, but after sometime the queen bee flew away so it was another disappointment.

Despite these setbacks, strong willed Chanchiben didn’t lose hope. Now she knew better agricultural techniques. She had gotten confidence that she could grow new crops. She learnt about growing a wadi of flowers from one of her relatives. It was very hard work to cultivate that Fulwadi. Today, that Fulwadi looks like in the picture shown here.

Now, she plants seedlings 3 times in a year for the flowers. The flowers keep growing from these throughout the year. She gets about 100 rupees per kilo by selling these flowers. This way now she earns about 2000-2500 rupees per month apart from the income from the farm and shop. Now, she grows Maize, Tuar, Paddy and Urad in monsoon season, while in winters she grows wheat and chickpeas. Alongside these crops, she also grows guar, bhindi, mangos, guavas and lemons, thanks to the training by Utthan. With all these enterprises, she is now able to achieve food security for her family. It is with this income that her husband has been able to set up the small grocery shop that we visited.



Now, only if this were a Bollywood or South Indian movie script, she might have a palace by now or maybe she might have become an MLA or at least she might have become a successful entrepreneur in flower industry by now. But this is not a movie script. This is a real life, common person's heroic story. This is a story of how a totally uneducated woman fought through her struggles and achieved a reasonable standard of living. She achieved all these just through her never say die attitude. After every setback, she came up with more will power to start again from zero and keep going forward. Such is the personality of this gritty woman. If served with morning coffee, this story of Chanchiben will get you motivated for some tough days at work.

The Marathon Runner

Geet Patel

All through his life, he has been a public figure and leader for his villagers. He is an active English and PE teacher in the schools in the region. Not only that, he is a national level marathon runner who has won more than 150 medals.

Mathurbhai Suwan was born in 1964. He studied till BA in a nearby town Devgadhi Baria. At the age of 26, in 1990, he returned home with something that no one seemed to possess back home, a knack for fitness. He started running in the morning around his field with no shoes or no other professional gears. No one was there to guide him about this. Still he kept doing it, because he wanted to do it.

His family found a wonderful girl Gangaben to be his lifemate. He made her start running also. He also started training her in javelin throw. The villagers used to mock him saying, “We know you’re crazy, but at least let your wife live in peace!” Today, the wife also has become a champion at javelin throw and has won many medals.

In 2002, Mathurbhai helped in building a temple in the village. With this he became a public figure. Many people got to know him. Thus he came in touch with a forest officer. Because of that officer, soon he got involved in the first JFMC -- Joint Forest Management Committee -- of the village. He was instrumental in forming it. He became the chairperson of JFMC. His mediation, as the JFMC chair, has been highly appreciated. During his tenure, there was a controversy between the villagers and the forest department. The villagers needed wood from the trees in the forest to make farming tools, which the forest officers

didn't allow. Mathurbhai advocated the case for the villagers. He won it in favour of the villagers and earned the right to moderately use the forest.

One day, a team from Utthan came to the village. They explained the importance of watershed to the villagers. Mathurbhai was convinced that this would be a very useful project for the village. He promised to help Utthan. He was an active worker and leader during the capacity building and construction phase. He was elected as chairperson of this watershed program for his village. The villagers together built contours and sandstone structures across the mountain and stone bunds in their farms. However, as these structures enriched only ground water (that was invisible), the advantages of the watershed were not immediately noticed by the villagers. The effects were noticed in the next season.

The villagers used to take some minor crops during winter, expecting very little productivity. But the conserved moisture led to more productivity for these crops. The villagers realised that watershed is a boon. This increased the water availability in village noticeably. Such successful results enabled Utthan to get even more funds for the village.

After the watershed, Mathurbhai got more involved in cultivating his own land. He started buying hybrid seeds. He bought other equipment for farming like drip-irrigation system, borewell etc. This started bringing in more income. In addition to his sports allowance, he earns around Rs.35,000 from farming now.



All through his life, he has been running around not only for himself, but for the villagers, like a true marathon runner!

Age is just a number!

Chhavi Pareek

Merubhai Mavi, a middle-aged man and a railway clerk, lived with his wife and seven children. His salary wasn't sufficient to support this large family. So, he practiced farming along with his job for extra income. He owned very small piece of land and it wasn't fertile. Whatever was produced was consumed by his family; Hardly anything was left for selling in the market.

With years passing by, the educational expenses of the children were increasing and it was becoming difficult for Merubhai to sustain these expenses. Soon, he reached his age of retirement. He started getting a pension of Rs. 30,000 but with five children studying in college and two children in high school, this amount was proving to be inadequate. His farmland was also barren because of the deficiency of water.

That was the time when Utthan came to the village to educate the farmers about the wadi project. Merubhai attended all the workshops sincerely. He even volunteered in the Utthan's initiative to build field bunds in the farms. He himself built bunds in his farm and turned his small land into a beautiful wadi. It was only a matter of a few years that he started getting a handful amount of money through the wadi. He had trees of mango and lemon in his wadi also with vegetables like bhindi, tomato, onion, etc.

The flourishing wadi made life comfortable, though he could save much money. A few years later, he started a business of sandalwood. He bought sandalwood sapling from Andhra Pradesh, thanks to his railway contacts, at a nominal rate of Rs. 25 and sold them in Vadodara and

Ahmedabad at around 150 Rs per sapling. To prevent the animals in his field, he even built a boundary around it. He had finally reached a good position in his life.

Then the time came when the ground water level went down a lot. Wells became dry. Merubhai had the far sightedness of consulting professional experts (which happened for the first time in village) to find the right place for digging the borewell. He also got the quality of the water checked (again for the first time in the village). Even though Merubhai didn't have much savings, he bought a solar pump. Due to the borewell, he was able to have water for irrigation throughout the year. This brought in much more income.

The income from wadi helped him to be able to buy livestock. This again helped his business. He came up with the idea of making a biogas plant. He invested in this equipment because he realized that the usage of biogas was far more economical, practical and at the same time good for the environment.

All this helped him to get a stronger hold on the finances of his household. His children grew up at the same time, they got married, they had children of their own and the size of the house they lived in grew smaller to accommodate all of them. With the money he earned, he got a bigger, pucca house built for the family. His wife had been a homemaker all her life. To add a new source of income to the household, he started a ration shop at the side of the house. This helped his wife in becoming an entrepreneur herself and helped contribute to the overall finances of the house. He is a proud owner of a Bolero car now.

Merubhai was eventually made the president of the FPO in his village. He started doing volunteer work in jilla setu and helped widows in the pension work. He is now a very respected person in his village. Everyone in his village looks up to him for any sort of help and he is always there to support and guide other villagers.

It wasn't an easy ride for Merubhai to get where he is today. The biggest achievement according to him is that he could educate every child of his. The man has set a brilliant example of the fact that even if you are surrounded by obstacles, even if you are growing old, you can always achieve what you want if you have a will.

Tower of Strength

Alka Parikh

They were a perfect couple – Kamaliben and Prabhudas. Kamliben was a teenager, 15 or 17 years old when they got married. Prabhudas was studying at that time. Kamliben quickly adjusted in the in-laws' place and started helping in agriculture. She did not want anyone to feel that the couple is a burden on the family since the husband is still studying and not bringing in any income.

Prabhudas graduated. After some time, he was made the co-ordinator for the mid-day meals scheme in the village school. In addition to that, he was running a dairy for the village. And as if that was not enough, when Utthan came to the village to build the watershed, Prabhudas joined them also as a volunteer and later supervisor. His parents started living close to their another piece of land and thus the couple was staying independently. Life was happy. Both husband and wife were very hard working, so home affairs were well managed.

But the happiness did not last for long. Prabhudas passed away at an early age, leaving Kamliben alone with three children. The eldest daughter, Ramila, was just 14 years old then. The sons were even younger.

Kamliben took over the entire management of house and work. She pleaded with the officers and made them appoint Ramila as the meals co-ordinator in place of Prabhudas. And she herself took control of both agriculture and dairy. To cultivate 2-3 acres of land on her own was not an easy task. But with her hard work, she persisted. She would

not allow her children to spend too much time on agriculture; she saw to it that they studied. She carried the entire load on her own head.

Agriculture was hard work but she had done it before, so managing it was not so difficult. The advice from Utthan team helped a lot in deciding the cultivation techniques. Based on what she had learnt from them, she used to decide what seeds and fertilizers to buy. She had worked closely with the Utthan team on watershed construction so she would maintain the field bunds in her own field to conserve water and increase moisture. With her hard work, she used to get upto 4000 kg tur from her land. Her control over agriculture was strong. She was highly regarded in the village for that.

The tough part was the dairy. She had not studied anything (she used to go to school with a friend. But in a few days, the friend decided she does not like school and dropped out. Kamliben had no one to go to school with so she also was withdrawn). But she knew what was to be done in the dairy. She would operate it and would make her nephew keep the books. The dairy also was running well under her. She herself now owns 9 buffaloes, 2 cows, 2 bullocks and 10 goats. Thus the dairy earned her good income.

So a widow, who had no education, no other support, stood firmly against the circumstances and took her family further. She got a well dug in the land and now has gotten a solar pump too for irrigation. She built a pucca house. She educated all three children – the eldest daughter has multiple degrees – B.A., M.A, B.P.Ed, and B.Ed. The younger son would not study anywhere; she got three schools changed but finally made him a policeman. The middle son decided to continue the close ties with Utthan and has been working with them as a field supervisor.

The education came at a cost; she had to sell all her ornaments. But she has no regrets. She is proud that all her children are well placed now.

Their house is one of the respected houses in the village. It is a major triumph for her.

Not only did she efficiently look after the family, but carried on her husband's connection with Utthan and worked towards village welfare. She heads the saving group of her village and deals with all financial transactions with her insights. The accounts of the saving group are maintained by her daughter. As the SHG head, it was she who got the handpump fixed in her colony – she told the sarpanch that the funds have come so please provide us with the facility! Any guest of Utthan coming to that area is always fed lunch at her place. Your head bows automatically when you meet her; her strength commands respect.

The Innovator

Geet Patel

Who doesn't dream of becoming a cricketer in India? This man dreamt it too. He couldn't achieve it, but he became a tough person through that, and became an agricultural revolutionary in the area.

Anilbhai Chauhan was born in 1984. He studied till standard two in Kundawada and then left. His father was a clerk in Ahmedabad, but his family was dysfunctional. His father wouldn't visit them or send enough money and would waste all the money on himself. Anilbhai did not study, but he did what he was good at. He played a lot of cricket in his farm with his friends, albeit without any professional training. You might say, a gully cricketer who played in grounds.

When he was 22, he visited Ahmedabad with his friends and went to the tryouts for Gujarat University cricket team. He was selected on the basis of his batting skills and got admission in the university for BCA. He started playing for the university team. It was the first time he came to know about different willows for bats, and it was the first time he wore pads. He played cricket for around three years there. But he was not a professionally trained player. His performance was not up to the mark and could not become a professional cricketer. He returned home after four years in 2010 with the degree.

When he returned home, his lands were not cultivated and his mother was not well. The land had become more valuable while he was gone, because of the watershed program by Utthan. He started growing standard crops in 2011. But he didn't just stop at subsistence. He went

to Saurashtra and Udaipur, to know what to grow and how to do it in dry lands.

He thought, why grow crops that only feed us? Why not to grow cash crops, earn much more and then buy the food from that? With the techniques learnt from Saurashtra and Udaipur, he started cultivating cotton and castor. The returns were much higher. Later, he brought special Maize seeds that produced cobs twice the size that grew around.



When one door closed on him, he turned to the second one. He put all his energy behind farming, and now he has pucca house as well as a storage house in the farm. He is rightly known as an innovator around.

The Altruist

Chaavi Pareek

Narvadbhai was just a simple farmer in Bhorva. He lived with his five children and wife in a kaccha house. But life was tough. The land he owned gave little amount of crop as it was very infertile. The agriculture income could barely provide food for his family. And it got tougher in summer when there was a shortage of water.

Utthan came like a wish come true for Narvadbhai. When Utthan educated the farmers about the watershed and wadi projects, it raised hopes in him for a better future. He attended the workshops in different cities and learned about techniques like mulching, and constructing field bunds.

The well-off farmers of his village built the field bunds with the help of machines like tractors. Narvadbhai didn't have proper machines to build the bunds on the farm. He was also from a scheduled tribe and was not even educated. Hence he received little support from the fellow villagers. But he did not lose heart. He took it upon himself to implement all the things he had learnt. He was not going to let go of any of the teachings in waste.

He built the field bunds with his bare hands. Soon after constructing the bunds, the land started becoming productive. Later, he also made a wadi in his land. He started growing crops like corn, tur, vegetables, etc. He even dug up a well in his farm. Watershed had increased the water levels and now water used to come in simple dug wells too. Thus he had an irrigated field now! His hard work paid off in a few years when

he started getting a large amount of produce. There were enough crops taken that could provide food to his family round the year and also provide a steady income to sustain the educational expenses of his children.

Steadily, their situation started to improve. They no longer had to migrate to other cities to find work. He was hopeful that he will construct a pucca house for his family soon. But this happiness did not last long as his wife fell severely sick. All his savings went into the medication. But he did not give up easily. Though the circumstances were not in his favor, he worked hard day and night. He was adamant about providing good education to his children. He decided not to build a pucca house and instead invest that money in his children's education.

Later, Narvadbhai installed a solar water pump in his field (the pumps were introduced in the village by Utthan). It was a big achievement for him as it was not easy to save that amount of money required to buy a solar pump. They did not face shortage of water even in summer now. The people around him who belonged to his own community envied his progress. One day, Narvadbhai found that they had stolen the main connecting wire of the solar pump. The the wires costed 7000 Rs, which was not a mean amount for him. But he somehow raised that money, made the connections again, and got the pump working. He was not one of those who give up easily.



The increased income through an irrigated field enabled him to have a ration shop. Income steadily started increasing. He is also thinking of opening a dairy to increase income. The day is not far when he will have a pucca house for his family.

But the thing that still bothered him was his children's education. They were in secondary school now and had to commute to a different village daily. He wanted a good school to be there in the village itself. So, he took the initiative to build a school in the village. He, once a man of meagre resources, donated a part of his own land to construct a school.

Narvadbhai is an inspiration for those who feel that there is nothing in future for them. Though he had hardly any resources, the way he single-handedly transformed a barren land to a beautiful wadi is remarkable. And to give away a part of land to school for a man, who has seen more sad days than happy ones, it was an incredible gesture.

Soldiers of Peace

Alka Parikh

Naseemben had never experienced joy in her life. Her mother died when she was 6 years old. The step mother used to be very mean with her. She made her do a lot of house work and did not allow her to go to school also. Naseem was married off at the age of 14 but her fate did not change. Her mother-in-law and husband used to beat her mercilessly. She tried to run away many times, but she would be caught and brought home to be beaten up again. This continued for five years. Finally she managed to get divorce and could be free. Her second marriage was happy. But after 10 years of marriage, the husband married another woman and made Naseemben leave the house. Although shattered, Naseem carried on bravely. She started tailoring work to make ends meet. She made sure that her daughter got proper education. Life was just steady when in 2002, there were communal riots in Gujarat. Her house was burnt to ground. She had to take refuge in a relief camp.

Merunben also lost her mother in her childhood; she was brought up by her brother. The brother sent her to school. She studied upto the seventh standard and got married at the age of 17. Husband used to be working at his aunt place and used to receive very little pay. They were somehow managing to survive with that. Then the husband found another job that was somewhat better paying and less oppressive. Thus they shifted to Sanjoli. In spite of limited means, they were living happily there; they had three children also. Finally they could look at future with some hope. But then there were riots in 2002. Their house was looted. Army came into the village and offered to take the affected people to safer places. They quickly packed and came out. There was a

tempo waiting outside. Assuming that it is a vehicle supplied by the army, some people went in the tempo. They were burnt alive in the tempo itself. However the others (including Merunben) who could not fit into the tempo, waited for another vehicle. They got the genuine army truck and were brought to a relief camp in Dahod. Some months went by. Then people from their village (Sanjoli) came to the camp, searching for the Sanjoli villagers. They told them that the king of Sanjoli has assured that no one will harm them and all the riot affected families can return back to the village. It was a big risk. After some deliberations, the entire group decided to return to Sanjoli. They had no other option anyway. They returned, with great fright and skepticism.

When Naseemben was living in the relief camp, Nafisaben of Utthan came there to meet the people living in the camp. Naseembanu was so impressed by her that she started following her wherever she would go in the camp. She volunteered to do anything that Nafisaben wanted. Similar was the experience of Merunben. Nafisaben came to Sanjoli village (Dhanpur taluka) to have a meeting of Hindus and Muslims and to bring them together. Merunben saw her and decided that this is the kind of work I want to associate with. She was very much inspired by Nafisaben.

Under Nafisaben's guidance, the peace activities started. Naseemben made saving groups in her village, Santrampur. She says, "I did not even know how to talk. When I went with Nafisaben, I started talking in meetings. Slowly I started holding meetings too. I would go around to everyone's house to collect their monthly instalments. I even learnt to operate bank account and started maintaining a register for recording the transactions". When they were rehabilitated, they got toilets, handpump, water tank, etc. Utthan advised them to invite the Hindus of the surrounding colonies to make use of these facilities. Such a gesture created a lot of goodwill. As they got to know each-other, they

were advised by Utthan to start celebrating Hindu and Muslim festivals together. Such community based celebrations also created a sense of being one. Slowly, for any function in the family, the Hindu and Muslim families started inviting each-other. Over a period of time, they have been successful in creating harmony.

In Sajoi, Merunben was also experiencing something new. She volunteered to work with Nafisaben. She was given the task of getting women together to form a saving group. Slowly groups were formed and she started looking after seven groups in that area. She would be the one to maintain registers, decide on loans, and deposit money in banks. She says, “I was scared of everything before. I had never gone out of the village before. Now I can go anywhere that you ask me to. I was so scared to go to my own children’s school before and today I go and talk to the officers in Taluka and district offices! I go to all the villages where the saving groups are running. No fear that something bad will happen to me. My women members are always there to look after me”. Their saving groups have both Hindu and Muslim members. Utthan has taught them also to celebrate festivals together and invite each-other for functions. They all are friends now.

After working for some years like this, Utthan suggested Naseem and Merun’s names for working in Nyay samite (justice committee). After getting trained, now they sit in the social welfare office of the government for four days in a week. They have started earning Rs. 200 per day for this work. They have resolved disputes about keeping the children in divorce cases, have helped women in getting rights over the family land, getting widow pension, getting hosing grant from the government, getting life insurance. They now go to the police station to resolve a case, talk to lawyers, fight with government officers if they ask for bribes, follow the progress of files for sanction of pensions or grants – the women who were scared about their own safety once are now helping other women to be on their feet!

Chanchiben was one more member of Utthan who joined Naseemben and Merunben in Nyay samiti. Chanchiben had seen Utthan workers in her relative's place and had expressed her desire to join the organization. She was also asked to start with forming saving groups. The interesting part of Chanchiben's work is how, without creating major scenes, she was able to bring in social changes. All the women in their community were supposed to cover their faces in front of their in-laws. She says that slowly she and many other members of her saving group stopped covering the faces. It was done gradually but was taken forward firmly. With the faces covered, there was no question of speaking in front of the elders. These women first stopped covering the faces and then started speaking in meetings as a group. Women could never dream of going out of the house all alone. Now even if the in-laws pass comments, these women just go out with their bags to attend meetings anywhere. When the Utthan workers give them ride on bikes, they now gracefully sit on the motorbike, without worrying that they are sitting with some man not related to them. Association with Utthan changed forever the way they interacted with the world. She says that she learnt a lot from Utthan. Undertaking the work of Nyay samite has made her fearless. Now she goes and argues with the panchayat members, police, and government officers. As Naseemben puts it, they all are now much more confident and feel that they are a force to reckon with .

The impactful work done by them has caught attention. Recently, in a function organized by an NGO in Gujarat, Naseemben was given a special award for the work that she has done to bring about peace in her region. As she stood on stage with people applauding from every corner, Naseemben remembered all the insults that were heaped on her by her step mother, mother-in-law and the two ex-husbands. This was the most befitting reply to them. In spite of them all, today she had become somebody.