



Gaon bachao yatra: campaign to save villages

“We are happy when the people we work with are satisfied with our interventions. We feel a sense of accomplishment,” he says reflecting on his work.

His phenomenal work in rural areas has not gone unnoticed. He was awarded the Padma

Shri in 2006 and continues to work with various government departments to ensure a better future for rural areas.



NAFISA BAROT

2005

*TN Khoshoo Memorial Award
for her work on rural liveli-
hoods and water conservation*

Born into a lower middle class Bohra family, Nafisa Barot was fascinated by village life. In the few years when her family was living in Jamnagar, she accompanied her father who worked as a radio engineer for the government on his trips to the nearby villages where he installed radios for the community. “These visits to the villages really fascinated me, especially the cows coming back in the evening with their bells ringing. I didn’t understand the issues in the villages at that time, but I was just fascinated by what I saw,” she says.

Her school and college years, some of which were distressing, left a deep impact on her and influenced her choice of vocation later in life. Being discriminated against for being a Muslim and a girl served to toughen her resolve. One such experience was when she was in Baroda studying for her undergraduate degree. She was forced to change her room seven times in six months just because she was a Muslim. “What happened on some occasions was that I would shift into the room at night, and in the morning they would say — Oh sorry, we didn’t know that you’re a Muslim,” she narrates. She couldn’t believe what she heard, and the first couple of times, consoled herself that the landlords were probably just conservative. But her

troubles didn’t abate. “The last room that I stayed in was when I was writing my exams,” she continues. “It was part of a house that was sealed off by the corporation because it was too dangerous to live in. The room was on the first floor and the owners said that the front door was locked but that I could go in from the back. I would always sleep near the door. Every time a truck would pass by the whole building would shake and I thought the building would collapse,” she remembers.

A new chapter

After graduating from college, she joined the Ahmedabad Study Action Group (ASAG), an organisation working on rural housing and development. The short period for which she was with the organisation, set her on course to work on the issues of development, empowerment and change. It was here that she met three women who together would go on to found Utthan, an organisation that works on issues of gender justice, peace and equality. During her time at ASAG, she and her colleagues were tasked with formulating a block level plan for Dhandhuka, a taluk in central Gujarat, at the behest of the Janata government. The administration had decided that block level plans should be implemented by NGOs who

are working on the ground, and not by block level officers who sat in their offices. The plan which they submitted, known as 'the people's plan for development', was ridiculed because it called for public participation from stakeholders on the ground. "Today public participation is a buzz word, but at that time it was unacceptable," she says.

Being a saline area, Dhandhuka needed a holistic development plan instead of specific targets, for instance, the digging of 10 borewells. Annoyed by the government's dismissive attitude towards the group's proposal, they began work in the area, recognising the wealth of traditional knowledge they encountered. Mahiti, a sister organisation, was formed, which has matured into a self-reliant organisation led by local leaders. Uthman and Mahiti initiated many movements which challenged patriarchy, feudal exploitation and caste discrimination at the grassroots. A women's movement which sought to assert their right to safe drinking water also emerged.

Before setting up Uthman, Nafisa spent a lot of time with Professor Ravi Matthai, the pioneer of the Jawaja experiment in rural livelihoods and empowerment. "Interactions with Professor Matthai were very valuable to me and Uthman since we have imbibed his values and understanding in our work," she recounts. "He said that unless you build communities from within, nothing is going to change." These words of wisdom have stayed with her through the years.

The journey with Uthman and Mahiti was a great learning experience for Nafisa in terms of mobilising communities and addressing issues of gender equality. From the Bhal area of Dhandhuka, roughly 80% of the population migrated for work. To understand the reasons for this large-scale migration, she and her team spoke to different people from the region. Interestingly, their responses var-



A pond lined with Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE) to collect and store water

ied based on their gender and position. The government had almost given up on the area. While the men placed precedence on employment, the women said that any change had to begin with access to drinking water. "This proved to be an eye opener for the team, not only with regards to women but also the struggles of Dalits and the poor.

Rising to the challenge

One of Uthman's first major interventions was raising their voice against centralised piped supply of water, and promoting local water resources instead. Villages in the area were to get water sourced from over a 100 kilometres away through a World Bank funded pipeline. Unfortunately, villages at the tail end of the pipeline got water only intermittently every couple of days, which often led to violent confrontations. Traditional ponds in the area had also run dry as a result of the digging of borewells by better-off farmers for cash crops. Deepening of ponds would not have solved the groundwater issue because of the rising levels of salinity in the shallow aquifers. After interaction with the community, the group came to the conclusion that any resolution to this problem had to be initiated by them, and that it was futile to depend on the government.

"What we did was to take up 20 hectares of 'waste land' from the government on which

to experiment. Using traditional knowledge from the area, we experimented by digging a pond and lining the bottom and sides of it with Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE). This was covered with a layer of 'sweet' (salt free) soil on the bottom and brick and lime on the sides. This project was undertaken with help from the Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited (IPCL) because the government was sceptical about funding a project proposed by rural women," she says. Through these first steps, the group entered a landscape mired with conflicts around policies, caste, feudalism and patriarchy.

In the early 1990s, the organisation brought out a report based on a state-level study of the situation of drinking water. A meeting which followed discussed the inclination towards the centralisation of water supply. "The problem with the system was that increasing amounts of money were being spent without any resolution of the exacerbating issues. We put forth the view that people's alternatives such as rainwater harvesting and recharging needed to be put into practice, but the government did not accept our view since it was critical of their functioning," she narrates.

This study was the beginning of Uthman's work in Bhavnagar to resist another planned centralised water supply system. A state level network called Pravah (which means flow) was also formed at this time. Their focus expanded to Amreli when they heard of plans to set up a copper smelting plant in the region. Along with other organisations, Uthman mobilised people in the area against the plant and took the issue to court where they obtained a stay. This intervention was only their beginning against large industrial projects. They were also part of the struggle against the Nirma cement plant in Bhavnagar, which is still being fought in court. They also organised local women to agitate against the construction of a nuclear plant in Mithivirdi,

also in Bhavnagar, the first after India and the US signed the civil nuclear agreement in 2008. Farmers in the region mounted a stiff resistance to the project because of which it has now been moved to Andhra Pradesh. After the communal violence in 2002, Uthman began work in the Panchmahal and Mahisagar districts for peace and justice. These processes have continuously highlighted that peace cannot be possible without justice. Uthman has also continued its work on the livelihood security of vulnerable communities. This has taken on a new dimension in the context of climate change, sustainability and the current pressures of genetically modified seeds. For these communities, livelihood security includes food security, natural resource management and addressing the impacts of climate change.

Nafisa continues to be a constant source of encouragement for those working within and beyond the organisation. Her determination to bring in equality in society has ensured that she has never backed off from any issue. Over the decades, she has worked persistently on a diverse set of issues such as access to safe water, sanitation, hygiene, and livelihood security, as well as gender equality, justice and peace. When asked how difficult it was to change mind-sets essential to bringing about any social change, she throws the question back and asks, "Whose mind-set?" She explains that it was hard to change mind-sets across the board, from policy makers to communities on the ground. However, she does admit that convincing policy makers was much more challenging, especially so because of the lack of a holistic approach. Issues of gender, caste and people with disabilities were swept under the rug, and quantifiable targets were given prominence instead.

She also criticises the government for ignoring the sustainability of projects. "The problem is that the government is constantly



Nafisa Barot in discussion with women understanding issues related to water

blaming the community for being a certain way. If there is no awareness and equal opportunity for capacity building, how are people supposed to do the 'right thing?' she questions. "There are so many good examples which demonstrate that with the participation of the community, especially of the women and the marginalised, substantial change can be brought about. The work of Gram Vikas, an organisation working on issues of water and sanitation, is a perfect example of what can be achieved with community participation."

Overcoming hurdles

Running an organisation like Utthan has been a constant struggle. Challenges have included perpetual confrontations with the government and vested interests, difficulties in finding funding, and problems that cropped up on the ground. When funding was hard to come by, what heartened her was that her team stuck with the organisa-

tion. "I was very touched by this because it highlighted the strength of the organisation and its values and approach. It also showed solidarity. This is a huge achievement. All our other achievements were possible only because of this solidarity."

When asked about her memorable experiences of working in such a demanding terrain, she remembers one involving a fact-finding mission to evaluate the situation of water on the ground. "When the government representatives came to the village, some of the villagers said that they were getting water and that there was no problem," she narrates. "But all of a sudden, a group of women barged into the meeting, gheraoed the representatives, and demanded that they visit some houses to see what the real situation was. They took one of the representatives to their house and told him what was happening. This is not something we had planned, but is very demonstrative of how the women were empowered," she says,



Nafisa Barot in conversation with Devuben Pandya who took charge of the leadership of Mahiti in 1994

her voice full of pride.

Another memorable experience was during her visit to a village called Jhankhi. "I will never forget what I saw," she begins. "There was a child of about four who was extremely dehydrated and looked like she was going to die soon. I asked her mother for some water to be brought. She left and returned half an hour later with half a glass of muddy water. I knew there was a water problem in the area but I asked her to get more water. She got only a little more. I got angry and asked her what kind of a mother she was for behaving like this. She immediately broke down. A lady beside her told me that the mother had given the water which she had kept for the following day. I just started crying and gave

her whatever water I had. This is something that has always remained with me. After a couple of days the child died."

"The insensitivity and injustice she has experienced and encountered has left her wondering why the government and society is not more just and secular."

Since stepping down as director of Utthan in 2016, Nafisa continues to mentor the team on various issues and assists in fund raising. Her passion for theatre has also been rekindled along with her desire to start writing again. "I have been thinking about the experiences of my life, and trying to explore how other people can benefit and be sensitised by them," she says.