

# Drought on India's West Coast

**T**hese personal stories are also life stories. They place events like drought in the context of everyday life. They illustrate the problems faced by women in both normal and extreme circumstances. But they are not messages of despair. Beyond women's resilience in the face of the most pressing difficulties, they demonstrate that it is possible, through carefully planned development programmes and more secure livelihoods, to reduce people's vulnerability to natural hazards such as drought. "We all like to tell our stories", says Sangita, "but who likes to listen?" Together, let us listen to *Sangita, Bashiben, Puriben and Paluben*.

## *I am Sangita*

My parents lived near Lunavada, in a village called Degamda. My husband is a school teacher in Rinchavani village, where he lives. But his village is in Virpur in Kheda. His family comes from there. We have a farm and some animals. Also a house, if you could call it that.

I go to Rinchavani to live with my husband only when there is no work in the village of Virpur. During the farming season I come back to work for my large joint family. I have only one daughter. No son. Maybe after the next pregnancy I will have a son. I have had so many pregnancies. But mostly without fruit. My husband has two brothers: one helps on the farm and the other goes to college – he is the first to go to college. My husband has two sisters. Both were married at a young age. His mother works on the farm and at home. They all work and work. But there is hardly any income and there are no savings. Even one failed crop lands us in big debt. But that is not new. My childhood saw many years of debt. Now my daughter experiences it.

*Sangita, Bashiben, Puriben and Paluben from the state of Gujarat tell us their stories. In their own words, they show the effect of drought on their families, and describe how they have tried to overcome it.*

My father took up a job in the big city of Ahmedabad, away from his village; so I stayed on with my grandmother. My mother joined my father. Who would cook for him? She had to go. My father wanted me to study. I am the second of four children. There is an elder sister and a younger brother and a younger sister. I finished my schooling in the village. There was a river to be crossed, mostly dry and barren but flooded in the monsoon, to reach school.

After the eighth class I dropped out. There was so much work to be done: the farm, the garden, domestic chores and what not – mostly collecting drinking water. I had to spend three hours a day just fetching drinking water. There were only two handpumps in the village. Most of the time they were out of order. Then we used the pond water, which was not very clean. We shared the water with animals. The buffaloes jump into the pond in the summer. When the water source was very dirty in late summer, I would walk to the river. By the time I had carried the water back on my head, I would be so thirsty that I could have drunk it all up myself. But I never did.

Yes, there was a well, but it was only usable for six months of the year; then the water dried up. In the monsoon it had too much water, all silted and dark.

The river had one attraction, though. If I could manage to get up early and reach the river there were not many villagers around, so I could take a good, long bath. But such a long bath led to delayed domestic work. I found the re-

turn journey most difficult. The pots were full and the clothes heavy after the wash; the sun was high, beating on my head. The return was always difficult. How I wished that I had a younger sister coming out of school to help me on my way back. But no, she had to go to work.

The drought had become regular, though not each year – only every third year. In a drought the river would go dry sooner. We would make holes in the sand at the right places on the bank to chase underground water. Cleaner water came out of these holes, but it took far too long.

If there was a marriage or death in a family, water was drawn endlessly. So much water is needed to feed and bathe all the guests!

All the difficulties doubled in a drought year. Agriculture suffered, leaving little food for us. Even drinking water would not be available. You feel besieged, as if your head is being crushed slowly. The big farmers would not give water for irrigation. They would give less and charge higher rates.

By fourteen I was happy to be married off from all this bother, maybe mostly because I thought my marriage would be a change of scene. But my husband's village has the same water problems. I felt very much at home again.

The year after my marriage I was pregnant. We were all excited. But it turned out to be a miscarriage. In two months, I was pregnant again, which lasted only seven months. The third pregnancy passed the seventh month and



*Twins . . .*

then the baby descended dangerously. The doctor put some stitches in. He was from the city. He said not to do any hand work or carry weight. I wanted to ask him: "Who will fetch the water?"

In my husband's village there is no

river. But every year they have drought. We have to walk to another village for water, and pay for it. Now have you heard of paying money for water? Drinking water?

Farming always suffers – flood or

drought. The money we earn and save by working hard on others' fields gets used up on water and fodder.

My life seems surrounded by water, as if I cannot get away from it. There is a wall of water.

## *I am Bhachiben*

Misery and hard life are written in my life. They have made me old before my time, but I have not lost hope.

I was born in Dhokawada, 20 kilometres from Vauva. My mother died during her second pregnancy. Both mother and child (a baby boy) died. I was the only child. My maternal uncle brought me up in Bakutra village, three kilometres from Dhokawada.

Both my uncle and aunt would go to work in the fields and I would do all the household work and look after the children. None of the children went to school.

When I was 15, I was married to Bhurabhai from Vauva. My husband's father had died when he was five. They had 35 acres of land, lots of wealth and a big house, but my mother-in-law never worked. She kept on selling all the property to run the household. So, when I got married, we had only five acres of land and just a one-room house left.

I did not allow them to sell that and started working as an agricultural labourer. Gradually, I also convinced my husband that he should do some work and he also started working. We would earn two rupees a day as wages. Then the drought came so we migrated to Saurashtra to work in the groundnut field. We returned after two years.

I gave birth to three sons but all of them died within six months. I could not work in the fields, so I used to collect fodder for households and earned one rupee for each bale of fodder. I would collect two bales daily (one each in the morning and evening). I also started embroidering skirts. In our caste, a daughter is to be given a minimum of 11 pairs of embroidered skirts, so some households would give me their skirts and pay 20 rupees per skirt. I embroidered three skirts a month.

I started saving from my income. During my last pregnancy I sold the buffalo given to me by my father for 600 rupees and got our house remortgaged. We started giving out our land for sharecropping, so we got back half of the total cultivation as our share.

Then came the drought of 1985. Both my husband and I started going to work on the relief sites – digging earth. There

was drought for four successive years and we dug earth for four years – there was no other way. All my hair fell out and I went bald.

But now I have guaranteed work. I am a member of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and our village group leader. I earn 600 to 700 rupees every month. From my year's savings, I have now bought a buffalo, so that gives me extra income. I am the sole breadwinner: my whole family lives on my income.

I also assist the other village women to do high-quality embroidery so that they also get regular work and income. Now, all the men in the village also respect me. They call me a *sahib* (honourific title) and salute me. The *sarpanch* (village headman or leader) also consults me when there is a crisis and asks me to present the issue to SEWA.

*Bhachiben Bhurabhai, 45 years old, is a leader of artisans in Vauva village.*



## *I am Puriben*

In those days nobody was educated, and though there were schools, no children attended. Even my brothers did not go to school. Since I was the eldest I used to look after the cattle and take them for grazing, as my brothers were too small then.

When I was 10 years old I started helping my father in the fields, doing weeding and sometimes cutting. My mother also started teaching me embroidery. There was no water in the village, so I had to walk three kilometres to fetch water from the nearest well.

When I was 17, I was married to Vaghabhai from Vauva. In our caste, marriages are arranged when the girls' mothers are pregnant. Even my marriage was arranged the same way. If on both sides girls are born, or boys, then we have to find another match.

My husband had four brothers. They also had land but it was not good cultivable land, so immediately after our marriage my mother-in-law asked to have a separate household. All the trouble started then. We had nothing, so we decided to migrate to Saurashtra. A lot of people used to go to Saurashtra to work as labourers in the groundnut fields. I sold my two embroidered blouses for 50 rupees and went to Saurashtra. My father had given me a buffalo and a few ornaments, which I left with my parents.

Since I was going away for the first time – we had never seen even the nearby village before – my father sent my younger sister with me.

We lived there for two years, and my eldest son was born there. We were paid a daily wage of four rupees then. We had only one meal, and saved some money that way; and then we returned to our village, Vauva.

My husband started working as a *sathi* (sharecropper) with a farmer in Jakhotra, a neighbouring village. Fortunately, we had a good monsoon that year and managed to earn 1,000 rupees that season. I sold the buffalo my father had given me for 1,500 rupees. From this 2,500 rupees, we purchased two acres of land and a plot to build our house.

But life was not going to be easy.