

The next year was a drought year. We started doing relief work, digging earth. I was seven months pregnant but still I had to work, otherwise the family's survival would be a problem. We were paid 30 rupees and five kilogrammes of wheat for the relief work, on which a family of four had to survive. Also, regular drought relief work was not available: during these times we borrowed money. I borrowed 2,000 rupees in one year, just to feed the family.

I resumed the digging work just 15 days after my son was born, as I could not afford further rest. My eldest son, who was four then, would look after the infant. We would make a makeshift cradle from my *odhna* (saree) in the open. But in summer, working in the day became unbearable, so we would all sit all day at the site. If we went away our absence would be noticed. In the evening we started digging and continued till late at night. So we worked day and night.

At times when there was no work, I would borrow from the moneylender at four per cent interest. If anyone from the family fell ill and work was not available, the family would be in a terrible crisis – both my husband and I would be very worried and tense -- but we only survived such difficult times with one hope: "God has given us life as human beings instead of animals (dogs and cats), so why not strive hard to make it meaningful? One day, surely, our hard labour will be rewarded." We survived four successive drought years thinking like this. Finally, the rains came.

We worked very hard to repay our debt of 2,000 rupees. But the next year was another drought year. But God always helps, and SEWA organizers visited our village. At first we were not convinced: we thought that these women from the towns were coming to exploit us; and so we would not cooperate. All the women would surround them and there would be chaos, so that the SEWA organizers would get tired and go away.

But they did not give up and kept on visiting. Whenever they came they always talked about our well being and benefit. Eventually, we thought of testing them and agreed to do some embroidery. They paid us really well for



the work, and that convinced us.

From that day (since 1989), I have been doing embroidery. Now I feel secure and relaxed. I easily earn 500 rupees a month. Now I do not go to work in the fields; even during the last drought no woman from the village went to dig earth.

Every month, from our earnings, we buy grains or food for storage, which may last for six months. The men also now respect us, as we bring home a guaranteed income.

Pushiben Vaghabai Kebu, 33 years old, is from Vauva village, a border village of Santalpur. She was born in Datrana village, seven kilometres from Vauva. Her father had 30 acres of land and they were a happy family. She has two sisters and two brothers.

I am Paluben

My father was a small farmer, and he died when the land was fallow. My mother tried to cultivate it, but found it difficult and could not produce enough harvest, so my brother, my sister and I started working as labourers on roadside or construction sites. This was not permanent or regular work. When we could not find this work we collected fuelwood and sold it at Radhanpur. I would start early in the morning and collect firewood all day; the next day I would go to Radhanpur to sell it, and earn six rupees. My father had two wives. My sister from the second marriage married me off to a man in Koliwada. I was 17. My in-laws were farmers. My husband was always ill. After five years of marriage his illness increased and he could not do hard work. So I worked very hard as an agricultural labourer. I had four children: two sons and two daughters to take care of, in addition to the day's hard work.

We had to sell all our land gradually in order to treat my husband for his illness. I started working. We learnt that my husband suffered from tuberculosis.

I was always ill-fated. We had successive droughts for four years. I used to dig earth, feed the family, and save as much as possible to take care of my husband's health. We were paid in cash and in kind, so with the grain given us I used to feed the family.

But we could not make ends meet. I had to borrow money at 10 per cent interest per month. We took my husband to big towns and cities for treatment. We also had to borrow money for that. Today I am 30,000 rupees in debt. I have no husband and no land.

Very often there would be no drought relief work, for a week or 10 days. I would get really worried but I could not sit at home waiting – I always went out hunting for some work. No work, no food. It's hard to sleep when you are hungry.

Finally, as I said, tragedy struck. I lost my husband in August 1988. I was shattered. I would think of my children and that would give me the strength to bear all my miseries. I had some hope but that was all I had: only hope.

I want to educate my children; I do not want them to suffer like me. My son is in the fifth grade and my daughter in the third grade. They get a scholarship of 90 rupees from the government. That is a relief. What a difference it makes to me! They may not get good jobs but they will not starve. They will know what is written on the wall of the *panchayat* (village council) house.

I need a minimum of 400 to 500 rupees every month for our basic needs of food and clothing. Whenever I get work, I buy daily rations; when there is no work, I borrow money or buy on credit. I do not like to borrow, so as soon as I earn a little I repay 5 or 10 rupees, whatever I can, so that the lenders will trust me and continue my credit line. I hope to repay to reborrow.

I do not want to be dependent on anyone. This is my fate. I have to face it and struggle and fight against the odds. I do not want charity. My husband was very sincere, hard-working and forthright. So he was respected in the village – hence, even in his absence I am not harassed by anyone. This is important to me. My honour gives me pride, makes me feel worthy of my children. I could have another husband, but how could I regain lost respect? Tell me.

Very often my brother-in-law, who is working in Delhi selling fruit, asks me to go to Delhi. But no, I do not want to leave my land. The Almighty will somehow give me enough work to survive. How can I leave my land, my people? I was born here. I would have more money, not all that much but some more; but would I have my people? My land?

Sometimes, I am put in very difficult situations. There is no work and no food, and on top of it all one of my four children falls sick. But if I sit waiting, who is going to help? So I immediately start taking up whatever work I can get. You have to keep at it. Look for work. In the end, there is always some work.

On one such occasion I saw Reemaben at the *panchayat* house in our village. At first, I hesitated to approach her. I went to the *panchayat* house and was trying to listen to what she was talking about to the men. Then she came to the house of our village *thakkar*, the

trader and money lender, and she insisted on meeting the village women. I rushed and took the front seat, hoping that she would at least bring some relief to my sufferings. I was not sure what she would talk about and so I prayed that she would talk about something beneficial to me – about work wages, income or money.

She talked about poor women. I felt as if she was talking about me. Then she talked of what women could do to increase their income. After this she left.

I was looking, waiting for her to return. At last, after two months, she returned, but started talking about dairy farming. I told her: I am poor, landless and have no cattle, but I want work. She talked of growing tree saplings. I knew it was difficult, as there was neither water nor land. The pond water was salty. But still I took the initiative and agreed to grow saplings – it was some work, at least. If you look for work, you do find it.

Reemaben told me to find at least five more women and a piece of common land. It seemed like climbing a mountain of difficulties. How could I do this? Whatever little hope was there, had gone. I did not do anything, and started going to dig earth. How could I find five women? How could I find out where there was a plot of land?

She came again and called a meeting of the women. I asked her where to get the land from. She said, ask the *sarpanch*. The next day I went to the *sarpanch's* wife and asked her to talk to her husband.

But life is not so easy for me. Where there was land, there was no source of water. But this time I did not want to give up. I thought hard and finally decided to raise the tree nursery near the pond. When Reemaben came, I told her of this idea and she agreed. My joy knew no bounds.

This was in 1990. For the last two years I have been raising the trees in the nursery. Because ours is a dry desert land we have lots of difficulties. But at least this is secure work. I am ready to face all the odds. I do not want to lose this work. The harder I work, the better the plants grow. I can go and work when I want. I come home at noon, in the heat, to feed my children.

I bought a cow for 1,500 rupees this year, by saving some money. I have paid 700 rupees; the rest I will pay in instalments. So I give the milk to my children and from the rest I make *ghee* (clarified butter, commonly used for cooking). This gives me extra income. I want to pay it off as soon as I can. I will borrow again.

I work very hard, face and fight all the odds to achieve three things: to educate my children; to try to repay as much of my debts as possible so that my children are not trapped in the same vicious circle; and to have a house of my own. I still do not have my own house. I live in a room in my brother-in-law's house. But one day I will have a house of my own, I hope. I always hope.

Paluben Devarbhai Parmar is 30. She used to live with her parents in Amirpura, in Radhanpur taluka (district). Her father died when she was two; she does not know the exact cause. They were six brothers and sisters; she was the middle child, the third surviving.



These stories were collected and translated by the Disaster Mitigation Institute in Ahmedabad, which is engaged in community-based projects to reduce vulnerability to drought in Gujarat. DMI has a particular interest in developing ways for the victims of natural hazards to not only be participants but actually to take the lead in this process to overcome their vulnerability. The development programmes mentioned in these pages are run by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), based in Ahmedabad. SEWA is an association of over 200,000 poor women living in both rural and urban areas ■

Source: Disasters and Development – Intermediate Technology, March 1997. The fourth of a series of occasional papers on disasters and development, published by the Intermediate Technology Group Ltd.