

# Women and drought

## Introduction

Parts of the State of Gujarat, on India's west coast, are dry and drought-prone. This paper contains the stories of four poor Gujarati women. The stories show the effects of drought on the women and their families, and how they have tried to overcome its impact.

The women describe their experiences in their own words, and we are grateful to them for sharing these experiences. We have made some minor editorial alterations for clarity but have tried to keep these to a minimum, to avoid imposing our own shape and style on the storytelling.

We have several reasons for choosing to reproduce the women's accounts. The first is that they are personal stories. All too often the views of 'victims' of disasters are overlooked by those who are trying to help them. Although they provide only glimpses rather than the more rounded pictures that accounts by external observers might give, the women's testimonies have an immediacy and offer an insight which others' observations cannot provide.

The stories are also life stories. They put events like drought into the context of the hardships - especially the economic hardships - of everyday life. They also illustrate very clearly the particular problems faced by women, in both normal and extreme circumstances.

Nonetheless, these accounts should not be read as messages of despair. In the first place, the women's remarkable resilience is evident, even in the face of the most pressing difficulties. In addition, in some of the stories we can see that it is possible to reduce people's vulnerability to natural hazards such as drought through carefully planned development programmes that provide more secure livelihoods. Those mentioned here 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.

The material was collected and translated by the Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) in Ahmedabad, which is engaged in community-based projects to reduce vulnerability to drought in Gujarat. DMI has a particular interest in developing ways whereby the 'victims' of natural hazards are not only participants in measures to overcome their vulnerability, but actually take the lead in this process.

We hope that this paper, the fourth in Intermediate Technology's series of 'occasional papers' on disasters and development, will be drawn upon in research and training. You are welcome to use and reproduce the material in any way that seems appropriate (with acknowledgment).

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We all like to tell our stories. But who likes to listen? And then, what is the point in complaining to others? It is best not to think about it.

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.

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 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 whatnot - 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 return 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! I never played with the guests, but my brother did.

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 then the baby descended dangerously. The doctor put some stitches in. He was from the city. He said not to do any hard 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 or up. There is a wall of water.

## II

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

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.

My uncle had three sons and one daughter. 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 fields. 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 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*<sup>1</sup> and salute me. The *sarpanch*<sup>2</sup> also consults me when there is a crisis and asks me to present the issue to SEWA.

## III

*Purben Vaghabai Kebu, 33 years old, is from Vauva village, a border village of Santaipur. 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.*

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

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<sup>1</sup> honorific title

<sup>2</sup> village headman or leader

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 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*<sup>3</sup> 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. 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*<sup>4</sup> 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 presence 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, as he has made us human beings, 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 wellbeing 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.

<sup>3</sup> sharecropper

<sup>4</sup> saree

## IV

*Paluben Devarbhai Parmar is 30. She used to live with her parents in Amirpura, in Radhanpur taluka<sup>5</sup>. 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.*

*Her father was a small farmer, and he died when the land was fallow. Her mother tried to cultivate it, but found it difficult and could not produce enough harvest, so Paluben and her brother and sister started working as labourers on roadside or construction sites. This was not permanent or regular work.*

*When they could not find this work they collected fuelwood and sold it at Radhanpur. Paluben would start early in the morning and collect firewood all day; the next day she 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. I had four children: two sons and two daughters, 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. My husband became very ill. He could not do any work. I started working as an agricultural labourer and used to look after the family. We learnt that he 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 ten days. I would get really worried but I could not sit at home waiting - I always go 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*<sup>6</sup> 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 five or ten 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, hardworking 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 can 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

<sup>5</sup> district

<sup>6</sup> village council

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*<sup>7</sup>. This gives me extra income. I want to repay 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.

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<sup>7</sup> clarified butter, commonly used for cooking

## Disaster Mitigation Institute

For more details about community programmes to counter drought in Gujarat, contact Mihir R Bhatt, Director, Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI), 'Ashish' 25, Vasundhara Colony, Gulbai Tekra, Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad 380 006, India (fax ++91-79-6568421).

## Duryog Nivaran

DMI is a member of Duryog Nivaran, a network of agencies in South Asia that is researching different aspects of disasters and vulnerability, and promoting better understanding and good practice. Intermediate Technology's offices in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are also members. One of Duryog Nivaran's research interests is gender and disasters. For more work on its work in this area, and on the network in general, contact The Co-ordinator, Duryog Nivaran, c/o Intermediate Technology, 5 Lionel Edirisinghe Mawatha, Kirulapone, Colombo 5, Sri Lanka (fax ++94-1-856188, email [itsrilan@sri.lanka.net](mailto:itsrilan@sri.lanka.net)).

## Occasional Papers

This is the fourth in Intermediate Technology's series of occasional papers on disasters and development. The other three are.

*Flood-resistant and cyclone-resistant housing in Bangladesh.*

*Cyclones, housing and mitigation. survey of community and NGO responses.*

*Vulnerability, disasters and development.*

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