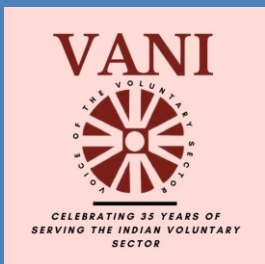


# Contribution of Civil Society Organisations in Rajasthan



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**Author:** Voluntary Action Network India

**December 2024**

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## **Published by:**

Voluntary Action Network India (VANI)

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## **Executive Summary**

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in India have played a crucial role in driving social, economic, and environmental development, often working tirelessly in the most challenging and underserved areas of the country. This compendium, *“Contribution of Civil Society Organisations in Rajasthan,”* highlights their dedication, resilience, and innovative efforts in addressing the diverse challenges faced by communities.

This compilation aims to document and recognize the contributions of CSOs, showcasing their impactful initiatives and the difference they have made. From fostering education, health, and sustainable livelihoods to promoting women’s empowerment, climate justice, and participatory governance, these organizations have significantly enhanced the development narrative of Jharkhand.

The purpose of this initiative is twofold. First, it seeks to address the lack of documentation of the outstanding work undertaken by CSOs, ensuring their efforts are acknowledged. Second, it aims to provide a resource for policymakers, academicians, and practitioners to draw insights and learn from the innovative approaches and best practices featured within these pages.

Through a blend of organizational profiles, thematic interventions, and success stories, this compendium showcases how CSOs have leveraged grassroots connections and community participation to drive change. It also reflects on the lessons learned and challenges faced, offering valuable perspectives for the sector’s future efforts.

This initiative is part of Voluntary Action Network India’s (VANI) broader effort to strengthen and promoting the positive narrative of and the civil society sector in India. We express our sincere gratitude to the CSOs featured in this compendium for their invaluable contributions and to our state-level partners who have supported this documentation process. We hope this compendium serves as a source of inspiration and knowledge for stakeholders across the development ecosystem.

We thank our core partner and donor organization, IM Sweden, for supporting VANI in this initiative. This document underscores the transformative impact of collective action and highlights the essential role of CSOs in fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

**Harsh Jaitili**

**Chief Executive Officer  
VANI**

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## Background of the Organization

The Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants Society (CECOEDECON) was initiated by a group of young social workers in 1982 to provide relief to the flood victims in Jaipur district. Over the last 43 years, the organization has grown into one of the leading Non-Governmental Development Organizations in Rajasthan, India.

*CECOEDECON's vision is "to achieve such development which is socially acceptable, economically viable, environmentally sound, effective in impact and addressing the needs of the underprivileged and marginalized people."* The organization is committed to building the capacities of the poor and vulnerable sections of society, enabling them to effectively and independently claim their rights.

CECOEDECON's work extends from building the capacities of partner communities in Rajasthan to **lobbying** and networking at the national and international levels. The organization achieves its goals by partnering with a number of satellite organizations, technical & funding organizations, networks and the Government.

Through a number of campaigns CECOEDECON also aims to influence the policy matters affecting the national, regional and international community, and thus indirectly extending its outreach to a larger number of people.

CECOEDECON has a multi-disciplinary team, where the members come from different disciplines, including professional social work, education, research, community leaders, judiciary, social activism, and media. The organization is guided by its core values which include: human dignity, community self-reliance, equity, gender equality, democracy, welfare, and accountability.

The organization directly reaches to people belonging to socially excluded groups, including Dalits, Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes, women, children, the landless, small and marginalized farmers. The total outreach of the organization also includes non-marginalized farmers. Furthermore, the organization extends to strengthening relationships and partnerships with various NGOs, media and other stakeholders at the state and national level.

At present CECOEDECON operates in nine districts across Rajasthan (Jaipur, Tonk, Baran, Sawai Madhopur, Kota, Alwar, Udaipur, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer,) and in Loharu (Haryana) and Indore (Madhya Pradesh). Its interventions range from land reclamation, soil and water conservation, and women's empowerment to child development within an environmentally sustainable and socially equitable developmental context through both direct and indirect interventions and policy engagement measures.

The major sectors of interventions include Natural Resources Management, Institutional Development, Livelihood Security, Health and malnutrition, Child Development, Gender, Climate change and Sustainable development.

It promotes and strengthens grassroots organizations and promotes alignment and collaborations with the government and other likeminded non-government institutions.

## Profile of Core Members

- Mr Sharad Joshi was the founder member and Secretary/CEO of CECOEDECON. An established voice in Indian Civil Society Circles, Mr Joshi led and supported Indian civil society organizations and collectives to present the Indian perspective on a whole range of sustainable development, agriculture, environment and climate change-related agenda at the global level for over 30 years. A grassroots activist at the core, his vision and work ranging from the micro (hands-on grassroots work) to the macro (global-level engagement) has been noteworthy.

After completing his Master of Social Work, Mr. Joshi ventured into the development sector as a specialist on labor welfare. While helping in the flood relief in Jaipur in the early 80s he came face to face with the concerns and struggles of the poor at the grassroots, which motivated him to work towards their rehabilitation, setting the foundation of CECOEDECON.

The organization under Mr. Joshi's passionate leadership undertook many innovative and highly effective natural resource management initiatives making it popular amongst the local people as "AgroAction". Realizing the high untapped potential of the community and following his strong belief in ensuring sustainability through community ownership, Mr. Joshi introduced the concept of Community Based Organizations in all elements of CECOEDECON's works. These CBOs because of Mr. Joshi's visionary leadership and strong efforts of his team now have the capacity to raise their concerns at different platforms to ensure their rights. They have become strong supportive structures for the community and also ensure the communities involvement in CECOEDECON's work.

Mr. Joshi was a proponent of providing a platform for the voices of the most marginalized communities, and had thus ensured CECOEDECON's presence at the national and international dialogues on issues that affect the welfare of the partner communities.

- **Manju Bala Joshi:** with over 40 years of experience of working on different development issues ranging from microfinance, community development, women empowerment etc., she is currently the Chief Executive Officer of the organization.
- **P.M. Paul:** Having more than 40 years of field experience he directs the field interventions of the organization with the support of the Community Based Organisation.
- **Vibhut Joshi:** Possesses more than 12 years of experience of working on different development issues related to climate change, SDG's, digital literacy. She plays an important role in resource mobilization for the organization.
- **Govind Vijay:** Has more than 27 years of experience of working on different development issues ranging from Agriculture Livelihood Security. Currently he is in charge of all the Agro-Ecology programs of the organization.
- **Dr. Alok Vyas :** Has more than 15 years of experience of working on different development issues ranging from Institutional Development, SDGs and NGos Networking etc. He is the Dy. Director of the organization mainly In-charge of the Institutional and Civil Society Development Programmes.
- **Charu Joshi:** Has more than 8 years of experience of working on different development issues ranging from monitoring and evaluation, research, digital literacy, etc. She leads the Monitoring & Evaluation unit.

- **Shweta Tiwari** : Has more than 25 years of experience of working on different development issues ranging from Reproductive Health, Gender equality, Education etc. She is the Senior Manager of a UNFPA supported programme.
- **Sita Ram Saini** : Has more than 30 years of experience of dealing with finance and administration. He is the head of the Finance & Account department of the organization.

## Thematic Engagements:

**Livelihood Security:** To facilitate the process of community empowerment so that they are able to realize their rights to productive resources, food and livelihoods.

**Major issues addressed:** Promoting climate resilient practices, ensuring the right to food, implementation of risk reduction schemes, improving livelihoods through the enhanced capacity of disaster management, facilitating informed livelihood choices, and access to off-farm and non-farm livelihoods.

**Basic Rights:** The theme of basic rights takes note of specific issues pertaining to children and adolescent girls.

**Major issues addressed:** child rights, health, gender and in collaboration with local constitutional bodies such as Panchayat and various committees formed under different schemes.

**Institutional Development:** Building relationships and strengthening partnerships with larger civil society organizations, media, judiciary, NGOs, and satellite institutions to influence policy matters. In addition, this theme includes building the institutional capacity of CBOs such as village development committees, and farmer associations at the block and district levels.

## Milestones:

### A. Relief and rehabilitation leading to Community Development

CECOEDECON was initiated to provide relief to the flood victims in Jaipur District in 1982. Following relief efforts, the organization embarked on long-term rehabilitation strategies, such as 'land Reclamation', 'Sand Dune Stabilization' and 'lab to land' initiatives with active community participation.

This relief and rehabilitation phase received additional impetus by a unique initiative 'Agro Action Family Helper Project' that emphasized the significance of Community Development with focus on children, family and the community.

### B. Comprehensive Review – Learning towards Integration

In 1997, the organization conducted its first 'Comprehensive Review'. It was the first review of the organization that critically looked into the impact of many different projects and the project support strategies of the organization. While appreciating the growth and expansion initiatives, the review emphasized the necessity to integrate the projects and move towards a consolidated program approach with a definite geographic focus.

Hence the organization started to focus on four major programs based on its past experiences, and comparative advantages. These programs included, NRM, IDP, Health and Education. Gender became a cross cutting issue in all the programs. While adopting this approach the organization made substantial changes in its strategies, systems and structures.

In the initial stages of its development, CECOEDECON followed a project approach and as per the needs of the communities developed several proposals and sought support from different donor agencies.

### **C. CBOs Strengthening and Networking**

At the state level CECOEDECON engages with various CBO's and NGO's to assist them to build and carry out the grassroots initiatives more effectively. Furthermore, the organization initiates and supports policy engagement efforts in the state by building coalitions to work on common issues, including those related to the rights of indigenous people, women, and children in addition to issues of Fair trade, climate change, Biodiversity etc.

At the national level, the organization's networking and outreach extends mostly throughout North and Central India primarily through facilitation of four satellite institutions of which PAIRVI (Public Advocacy Initiatives for Rights and Values India) plays the role of enhancing policy engagement competencies of various grassroots organizations working in North and Central India so that they can more effectively represent the interests of the poor and powerless. PAIRVI which is strategically placed at the national capital of India (New Delhi) has made concerted and collective action at the federal level leading to engagement with the union government and influencing decisions and policies related to a number of national, regional and international issues that are emerging.

Further, five additional satellite institutions – Development Coordination Network Committee (DCNC - This has been transformed into SanjaManch), Centre for Dalit Human Rights (CDHR), JalPrahari, SWARAJ and MAUSAM were established to undertake a concentrative follow-up action for promotion and protection of livelihoods, Social, Economic and environmental Justice, built on the efforts and experiences of CECOEDECON. Thus, these spin-off 'satellite institutions' were envisaged to complement and supplement the organization's efforts in addressing the issues it raised at the meso and macro levels. CECOEDECON also associates with other NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) at the national and international levels such as the Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), South Asian Network for Social and Agricultural Development (SANSAD), National Social Watch Coalition (NSWC), Wada Na Todo, Centre for Environment Concerns (CEC), Delhi School of Social Work Society, Association of the Retired Supreme Court and High Court Judges, Sustainable Agriculture Information Network, GM free Campaign. Global Week of Action, UN Millennium Campaign, and World Social Forum among others at the national level while also associating in international events related to Make Trade Fair, Food Trade and Nutrition coalition, IACD, UNFCCC, UNCBD, UNCSW, GEF, Rio+20 processes, SDG etc.

### **D. CECOEDECON's Organizational Development (OD) Process**

In order to have a systematic approach to improve the functions and systems for better organizational performance the process of OD/ID was undertaken for a period of 3 years (2006-2009). In undertaking the OD process, CECOEDECON's objective was to guide staff and other key stakeholders in contributing to the improved performance of the organization, so that the efficiency, effectiveness and overall impact of its programs and projects could be enhanced. OD is essentially an internal change process which addresses the internal functioning of CECOEDECON as a development organization.

## **Specialization and Unique Characteristics:**

### **A. Strengthening of Community Based Organizations**

One of the major strategies of the organization is to build the institutions of the people and strengthen them in such a way that in the long run they become the prime agents of development



CECOEDECON started to establish Village Development Committees in all the villages, and formed their block level federations of Kisan Seva Samiti (KSS). This block level KSSs are further formed into KSSM ( KisanSevaSamitiMahaSangh) at the state level. So also the 'Self Help Groups especially of women were established separately and their block level federations were developed into cooperatives. A number of other "Youth Groups", Bal Panchayat, ShahariaVikas Manch etc were also formed to strengthen the community mobilization efforts. A lot of capacity building and hand holding support were provided to these institutions to become effective agents of development. These institutions have become so strong that they can function independently and deal with issues effectively.

There are a number of issues where the people's organizations along with KSS and KSSM have been able to take up successfully a number of issues both at the micro and macro levels. Some of the most prominent issues that have been taken up are "irregularities in PDS" , campaign against GMOs, "effective implementation of MGNREGA", "Monitoring of Mid Day Meal and ICDS" "water scarcity"; "Improving quality of education and health systems" drought monitoring, inclusion of Nomads in the census survey, Free Trade Agreement , minimum support price, Land rights etc. These issues were taken up at different levels through various strategic tools, such as RTI, memorandums, protest rallies, personal/ group delegation/ negotiations, dialogues etc. This demonstrates the transforming role of KSS, by which it is increasingly becoming a 'people's movement' where the voices (issues) of the poor and the marginalized are taken up effectively at different forums and levels.

## **B. Natural Resource Management**

Recognizing the consequences of continuous drought on the livelihoods of the marginalized communities and the devastating impact on the environment causing severe degradation of land & water, resource depletion of forest and loss of biodiversity, CECOEDECON, in consultation with the partner communities developed proactive strategies and prioritized specific drought management and mitigation interventions. Some of the major interventions included 'Rainwater Harvesting', 'Soil and Water Conservation', 'Watershed Development', 'Social Forestry', 'Eco-regeneration', 'Natural Resource Management', 'Sustainable Agriculture' etc. These initiatives not only addressed the immediate, short and long term needs of the communities but also strengthened the institutional capacity to address them on a sustainable basis, employing different strategies.

The expertise of the organization in the Natural Resource Management also got recognized not only by the Govt. but also by other NGOs and agencies. The expertise and the learning gained from these programs were instrumental in promoting further concepts related to 'Gender in NRM', 'Water Equity', 'Drought Monitoring', 'Disaster Preparedness' etc. These programs provided a strong base for the current organizational initiatives related to Food Sovereignty, Climate Resilience, Biodiversity, etc.

## **C. Climate Change**

Realizing the significance of the issue of climate change and the urgency to act on it, CECOEDECON included the issue in its work.

CECOEDECON has been responding to environmental disasters faced by its partner communities. Post 1995, there has been a realization that the frequency of droughts has been increasing, and in 2007 there was a devastating flood in Barmer District. After working on disaster relief and rehabilitation in flood affected Barmer villages, CECOEDECON adopted the disaster preparedness approach and implemented a project on "Action for Disaster Preparedness" in 6 blocks of 4 districts of the state. Learning from this project the concept of Disaster Task Forces and Safety Nets (grain, seed and fodder banks) were accepted as good practices for disaster preparedness as well as adapting to highly variable weather patterns

induced by climate change (Refer: Book – Experiences of project ADP) and the practices were mainstreamed in the organization’s work on sustainable agriculture.

Various interventions including promoting climate resilient agriculture practices, developing smart farmers, promoting kitchen gardens, organizing public hearings on the impact of climate change in rain fed areas, organizing food festivals to promote millets and developing short videos on best practices of sustainable agriculture models, have been taken up under various projects.

CECOEDECON has actively participated in the UNFCCC CoP and raised the concerns and challenges of small farmers, women farmers at other international platforms.

## Organizational Impact

- The organization under the leadership of Mr Sharad Joshi, the founder of the organization undertook many innovative and highly effective natural resource management initiatives which have a huge impact on the lives of local communities such as - developing water harvesting structures, soil conservation, tree plantation and promoting indigenous knowledge. CECOEDECON with the support of local community constructed 83 anicuts which have a huge impact on the livelihood of the local community.
- At present more than 500 Community Based Organizations (CBOs) are working as development agents at community level. These CBOs now have the capacity to raise their concerns at different platforms.
- On the emerging issues such as climate change and Sustainable Development, CECOEDECON established constructive partnership with CSOs, Parliamentarians, judiciary Policy makers, Media, women groups, farmers and youth by organizing collective awareness programs, public hearings, state and national level consultations on climate change and Sustainable Development Goals.
- CECOEDECON has been actively involved in the global development process on Sustainable Development Goals and Climate Change initiated by the United Nations and put forward the local experience, knowledge and grass root level issues of vulnerable communities at global platforms. CECOEDECON has also been associated with the Government of Madhya Pradesh as knowledge partner in organizing VicharMahakumbh, an International Conference on Living the Right Way. National consultation on climate change with the association of retired judges of the Supreme Court and high courts was an innovative intervention which was recognized by the legal fraternity. Recognizing organizational work and experiences, we have been given space in a number of committees at International, National, Regional and local level. The United Nation (UN) has given us ECOSOC status (Economic and Social Council).
- CECOEDECON supported the voice of Indian civil society organizations and collectives to present the Indian perspective on a whole range of Livelihood Security, climate change and sustainable development related agenda, both at local and the global levels

## Learning’s:

- Despite the organization’s focus on rights-based approach to development, a long, continuous review and reflection process have made the organization realize that no one approach is good enough to apply to different programs that it carries out currently. Some of its recent initiatives related to Malnutrition, Food Fortification, Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development require different strategies and combination of varied approaches. Therefore, based on its experience, though the rights based approach remains the main mantra, the organization is free to follow a more inclusive and comprehensive “CECOEDECON Approach” which is more practical and efficient.

- CECOEDECON obtained the coveted UN ECOSOC Special Consultative Status in 2013. This prestigious platform provides opportunities for NGOs to partake in UN deliberations. The organization through its coalition, Beyond Copenhagen Collective, has been actively involved in all relevant opportunities that aim to establish common understanding of stakeholders on issues, identify actors and their roles in sustainable development, propose policy choices allowing an integrated approach to sustainable development, and at the same time consider local and national experiences for decision making.
- Looking to the present scenario, where various developmental processes like SDGs, climate change are in the crucial stage both at national and international level there are opportunities for CECOEDECON as a part of civil society can play an important and effective role through broadening partnership with like mind people, organizations and networks.
- CECOEDECON believes that Networks help to link individuals, groups and organizations of various walks of life and provide greater strength to people working for a Common cause. Networks not only provide opportunity, but also encourage their members to interact, exchange information, dialogue, and act together with those who may be placed in different organizational settings—voluntary organizations, government or academic institutions, trade unions, political parties, women’s organizations, mass movements, campaigns etc. The Institutional Development (ID) process in CECOEDECON has focused on partnership building through networking and alliance building at various levels, from local to international level. CECOEDECON will continue its association with Parliamentarians, Policy makers, Media, academia and network partners on emerging development issues.
- There is a lack of clarity among staff on which grassroots issues CECOEDECON is taking to the UN meetings and national level policy makers, and what are the achievements of these interventions in regard to those issues. Although donors have appreciated CECOEDECON’s work on climate change, CECOEDECON needs to show clear relationships between micro and macro level interventions and have clarity on the progress made.
- Consultations and events organized by the ECOSOC will be top priority for engagement and intervention for CECOEDECON in the next few years as the global development processes – Post-2015 Development Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals, and the UNFCCC Climate Change negotiations – pick up pace, come to a conclusive end, set the stage for convergence and implementation and engage public, governments and civil society at all stages.

## Success Stories

### 1. Prabhu Ji, Village Hingotia, Rajasthan

I am a farmer from Tonk District, Rajasthan. I joined CECOEDECON’s Village Development Committee ten years ago. Over time, I realized that while hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, and toxic pesticides may offer short-term benefits to farmers, they ultimately harm the farm ecosystem and soil fertility in the long run. In 2021, I became a Smart Farmer under the PIIRD project, receiving tremendous support from CECOEDECON. The organization assisted me by providing high-quality seeds, micro-irrigation systems, compost manure pits, fruit plants, scheme linkage support, and essential knowledge. The project supplied me with 250 papaya plants which resulted in a successful harvest. I developed an organic farm and became the first in my region to cultivate a horticulture farm and produce papayas that significantly increased my income. I am now inspiring other farmers to adopt agro-ecological practices, potentially revolutionizing agriculture in Rajasthan.

## **2. Success story of an initiative taken by Kisan Sewa Samiti**

### **Seeds of Changes: The power of collective action**

In 2010, the Department of Agriculture, Government of Rajasthan, aiming to improve agricultural production, entered into a series of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with private seed companies. These agreements, involving the production, processing, distribution of seeds, and research & development, raised concerns due to their lack of transparency and the perceived potential harm they posed to small farmers and traders. Moreover, besides being producers of hybrid, biotech, or GM seeds, these companies were major pesticide producing companies. Since the implementation of the agreements was certain to affect the lives and livelihoods of farmers and small traders, a campaign was initiated by Sajha Manch (a platform of 150 rural community organizations) and the Kisan Sewa Samiti Mahasangh (KSSM), in support of CECOEDECON. The Mahasangh is a state-level federation of farmers organizations that work on farming and agriculture related issues in Rajasthan. Through sustained efforts, this movement succeeded in having the MoUs revoked, illustrating the power of collective action.

### **Context and Concerns**

The MoUs, signed hastily and without consulting farmers or other key stakeholders, proposed collaborations between the Government and private companies, particularly Monsanto India Ltd. in a public-private partnership model. The agreements focussed on high-yielding hybrid and genetically modified (GM) seeds, primarily for crops like maize, cotton, and vegetables. The secrecy surrounding the MoUs, particularly in terms of the access to state resources provided to these companies, caused significant alarm among local farmers. Concerns were further amplified by the fact that these agreements could potentially monopolize the seed market, making small farmers dependent on buying seeds annually, a departure from the traditional practice of saving seeds for future use. This raised fears of economic vulnerability, reduced biodiversity, and environmental risks from increased pesticide use.

### **Mobilization and Resistance**

Upon learning of the MoUs, the organization used the Right to Information (RTI) Act to obtain copies of the agreements and the information was shared with farmer organizations. With guidance received from Justice Panachand Jain, Retired Judge of Rajasthan High Court, members of the KSS and Sanjha Manch devised a multi-tier strategy to raise awareness and influence the Government. At the grassroots level, choupal meetings were held in villages to inform farmers, PRIs, about the implications of the agreements. Women, youth, and Panchayat members were mobilized to participate in discussions and campaigns and raise the issue at local public forums. Simultaneously, at the district and block levels, rallies were organized and memorandums were submitted to the concerned departments. Local MLAs and media were sensitized. At the state level, lobbying with legislators, and consultations were undertaken with various farmer unions. Media outreach played a crucial role in amplifying the movement's message, ensuring that the concerns of the farmers reached a wider audience.

### **Legal and Political Efforts**

The legal fraternity also played a pivotal role in supporting the movement. Justice Panachand Jain, a retired High Court Judge, thoroughly studied the MoUs and pointed out several concerns regarding the legality of the MoUs signed. In his article published in a daily newspaper of Jaipur, Retired Justice Jain highlighted concerns about constitutional violations in the signing of these agreements, particularly the failure to involve the state Governor, as required under Article 299 of the Indian Constitution. These legal critiques added a significant layer of legitimacy to the movement's cause, reinforcing the argument that the agreements lacked constitutional and procedural transparency. Farmer's organizations also engaged with elected representatives, leading to some MLAs raising questions in the State Legislative Assembly and

writing to the Chief Minister. Representations/ Memorandums were submitted by Kisan Sewa Samiti and other farmer organizations to the Chief Minister to intervene in the matter and rescind the signed MOUs. These actions helped ensure that the issue gained political traction, and some public representatives expressed their support for the farmers' demands.

**The Turning Point: Mass Mobilization**

A significant demonstration took place in Jaipur during the 2011 budget session, where more than a thousand farmers marched to the Rajasthan Vidhan Sabha. During this march, a memorandum was presented to the Chief Minister of Rajasthan demanding cancellation of the signed MoUs. During the budget session, Smt. Vasundhara Raje, the leader of opposition also expressed concerns on the issue. Kisan Morcha, a farmer's organization led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, declared that this issue will be a key issue in their agenda for the year. This peaceful march, which involved various farmer unions and non-governmental organizations, was a turning point in the campaign. The participation of MLAs and political leaders further added to the momentum.

As a result of these sustained efforts, which brought together stakeholders from different sectors including farmers, media, legislation, governance, researchers, NGOs, etc., the Government of Rajasthan agreed to form a committee of 5 members to review the MoUs. The committee met on February 14, 2011 and recommended measures that did little to fully address the farmer's concerns and the measures recommended failed to get the approval of the state Government.

A number of Gram Panchayats passed resolutions opposing the agreements and pledging to not use GM seeds in their areas. Copies of the resolutions were sent to the Chief Minister and district administration. The media provided extensive coverage of the issue and the campaign, which immensely helped the cause. Through sustained efforts led by Sajha Manch and Kisan Sewa Samiti, with the support of CECOEDECON and a broader network of stakeholders, effective engagement with policy makers led to the MoUs being revoked in November 2011. This was a remarkable success achieved through a constitutional, democratic and non-violent approach led by the farmers.

**Lessons Learned**

This movement offers valuable lessons on the importance of and the power of collective action. The success of the campaign is not merely in the revocation of the MoUs but in demonstrating how farmers and members of the society, when informed and organized, can effectively influence decisions that could adversely affect their lives and livelihoods. The case also highlights the significance of transparency and stakeholder engagement in policy making, especially when they have far reaching implications for communities. For Civil Society organizations, it serves as a reminder that grassroots mobilization, supported by awareness, and meaningful engagement with key stakeholders, can lead to effective change.

**Conclusion**

The campaign led by the Kisan Sewa Samiti and supported by CECOEDECON and other community organizations is a testament to the strength of community-driven initiatives. By using democratic means, the movement successfully safeguarded interests of small farmers in Rajasthan, setting a powerful example for future grassroots movements.





## Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS)

### Overview

Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS) is a Non-Governmental Organization working in the rural areas of India including the States of Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh. It attempts to bring change by pioneering innovative need-based development models and committed partnerships with the Government, non-profits, socially responsible corporations and Community-based Organisations (CBOs). GRAVIS' multifaceted efforts and holistic solutions specifically aimed towards the marginalised have impacted lives of many living in severe poverty and poor health.

Blending traditional community knowledge with modern science while relying on the principle of integrated development, the organisation has been implementing interventions in the areas of health, education, water security, agriculture, research and advocacy and community mobilization contributing significantly towards key Sustainable Development Goals of no poverty, zero hunger, good health and wellbeing, gender equality, clean water and sanitation and climate action. Guided by the Gandhian principles of *Sarvodaya* (all rising, but the last person first) and *Gram Swaraj* (village self-rule) GRAVIS works towards rehabilitation of the rural community, enabling villages to take ownership of their environment, institutions, and relations.

Its present-day development programmes provide cross-cutting solutions and contribute to improved livelihoods and health of desert communities battling with chronic drought conditions. Women and older people are an integral part of designing and implementing these interventions and are trained to fully engage in planning, implementing and monitoring village level community development projects. GRAVIS strongly believes in documenting its learning and experiences by analysing its successes and shortcomings to modify future programmes and maximise the impact of its outcomes to promote replication.

Through its research and advocacy arm, many activities including baseline surveys, endline reviews, compilation of best practices and success stories, evidence-based research using qualitative and quantitative methods, dissemination and advocacy events to share learning and motivate the most vulnerable to raise their voice against inequalities, are conducted on a regular basis. As a result of these research interventions, several studies have been published, reports of which can be accessed [here](#).

### Inception

In 1983, Laxmi Chand Tyagi and Shashi Tyagi founded GRAVIS at Gagadi village, 60 km from the city of Jodhpur. The couple came to Rajasthan from Uttar Pradesh in the late 1970s. In the 1960s and 1970s, they had been active in many of the social movements led by prominent activists like Vinoba Bhave and Jai Prakash Narayan. With their first-hand experience in activism and formal qualifications in agriculture and education, they were prepared to build an organization that was scientifically sound as well as sensitive and responsive to the needs of people. They decided to work in regions which lacked basic resources, such as water and where very few development agencies were present. With this in their minds, they moved to the Thar desert in 1980 and that is how GRAVIS was born. The journey that began with 20 villages has now reached to more than 2000 villages. With an administrative office in the city of Jodhpur

and 19 field centres spanning its areas of operation, GRAVIS has reached out to more than 2 million people and established over 4000 Community-based Organisations (CBOs).

## **Geographical footprint**

In spite of being one of the most difficult terrains for human habitation with recurring droughts and acute water shortage, the Thar is the most densely populated desert in the world. Not to mention, majority of its population follow agriculture as their primary occupation with animal husbandry as their second most important support. It becomes very obvious that water and food security were, are and will be severely at stake in the region for years to come as the most vulnerable sections of the society being women, children and the elderly continue to suffer.

This is why one of the most barren landscapes on earth, neglected for the longest time became a matter of grave concern. GRAVIS – Centre for People’s Sciences and Rural Development was one of the first grassroots development organizations to enter the Thar region of Rajasthan where survival of humans, animals and vegetation continued to be an undeniable challenge for centuries. Founded with the objective to serve the marginalized population of rural and remote areas of the Thar Desert by securing their livelihood through an integrated development approach and meaningful community participation, the initiative led by Late L. C. Tyagi and Late Shashi Tyagi (along with some social activists) gradually extended to the northern State of Uttarakhand and Bundelkhand region of the State of Uttar Pradesh in recent years.

The hilly to mountain terrain there poses challenges to subsistence farmers living in the area. Being located in the foothills of the Himalaya, Uttarakhand is prone to floods and with shifting climate patterns due to global warming it is most definitely at the risk of dry periods. On the other hand, Bundelkhand in U.P is a drought prone area. Farmers’ development and support therefore is substantial alongside women empowerment and programmes that focus on community health. GRAVIS also responds to relief needs during disasters across India based on resources available and existing capabilities. It also engages in learning and knowledge exchange with many other organizations in India, South East Asia, Africa and other parts of the world.

Although majority of GRAVIS’ work falls under drought mitigation caused by the water crisis in the Thar Desert, we believe in an integrated approach to sustainable development, working to not only enable a secure and safe source of water for drinking and irrigation, but also transforming lives through education, healthcare, microfinance and advocacy for the rights of those more vulnerable in society.

## **Who we work with**

We work with the most socio-economically backward sections in the rural areas including women, children and the elderly with the aim to build their resilience and capacities such that they come up with solutions to the most pressing challenges of drought prone rural areas they inhabit. It is always ensured that women participate in all programmes and activities. They are definitely the protagonists and agents of large-scale change. Blending traditional community knowledge with modern scientific technological innovations, these solutions have proved to be financially viable, socially acceptable and sustainable in the long run. In addition, our special focus is towards entitlements of the mineworkers who form a large part of the informal labour population in the Thar Desert. It intervenes with awareness and educational activities for mineworkers and their families, health and safety measures and provision of legal aid for their entitlements.

## **Unique guiding principles, approach and strategy**

At GRAVIS, how we attain our goal is as important as the goal itself. The values that guide our strategies and processes are in deep cognizance with the attributes of fairness and sustainability.

Our key guiding principles are community participation, inclusion, capacity building, self-reliance, blending science and traditional knowledge and co-operation. Over the years, our work with the rural communities has brought to light a critical insight about the dynamics of oppression and the only way to end it is to create countervailing power that opposes it. In rural Thar and other areas where we work, this is being done by collectivizing the most oppressed (i.e., women, elderly and marginal cultivators) democratically and blending their traditional wisdom with new techniques to create long-term, sustainable and cost-effective means for improving their lives.

To achieve the overarching goal of creating a self-reliant village unit, we ensure involvement of local communities in its programmes and interventions, train and build their capacities further and develop community ownership. Keeping the above in view, we at GRAVIS continuously promote people's organizations.

A range of CBOs therefore form the core element of GRAVIS' work and we seek to actively engage community members in our projects, rather than merely adding resources to a broken system. This also underlines the importance of interventions not only being planned with the local communities but also including them at all times to the largest extent possible in its execution, maintenance and monitoring.

### **Governance, operations and partnerships**

GRAVIS operates with the support of a simple and an effective organization structure that helps to integrate our efforts at multiple levels with a variety of stakeholders. Our principal governing structure is the General Body, which comprises of 20 members. The General Body is responsible for the approval and disapproval of prospective budgets, activities and proposals. They also elect GRAVIS' Governing Board. The Board currently has 7 members and is responsible for the overall supervision of financial, developmental and organizational planning as well as implementation of projects.

The Executive Director of GRAVIS manages the daily activities and is held accountable to the Secretary of the Governing Board. For every project undertaken, a Project Coordinator is specifically assigned. He/she oversees various implementation aspects of the project and works frequently with Field Centre Coordinators at one or more of GRAVIS' field centers across all areas of operation.

In turn, Field Center Coordinators report directly to Project Coordinators as they manage implementation of the projects at the grass-root level together with Village Development Committees (VDCs) and other CBOs.

This work is immensely supported by field and community workers, volunteers, village dwellers as well [national and international partner organisations](#) of GRAVIS who aid in carrying out projects, programmes and initiatives. Additional support is provided by scientists, consultants, horticulturists, agriculturists, medical professionals, veterinarians, social scientists, education professionals, economists and engineers who are frequently consulted.

### **Key thematic areas**

GRAVIS follows a sustainable and holistic approach towards development. Several issues faced by rural communities have been identified. These are closely tied to one another so instead of focusing on one single challenge, GRAVIS tackles an entire gamut of challenges as improvement in one area is likely to positively affect other areas.



With a complementary set of projects in partnership with CBOs GRAVIS works to raise the overall living standard of the villagers.

Below are the key interventions and focus areas tailored to match the needs of communities:

### **(a) Water security**

The availability of water is a constant struggle in drought-prone areas where GRAVIS works. Lack of access to desired quantity and quality of water not only jeopardizes health of villagers but also severely affects agriculture, education of children, especially girls who often have to spend their entire day in the process of procuring water for their households. For the above reasons, sustainable methods of increasing the amount of water available to desert communities are of foremost importance. To achieve this, GRAVIS implements Integrated Watershed programme and relies on the construction of traditional and time-tested monsoon/rainwater harvesting structures like water storage tanks (taankas), ponds (naadis) and percolation wells (beris). As on today more than 9000 taankas have been constructed, around 500 naadis and 700 beris renovated and 1400 capacity building trainings on water management have been conducted for communities.

## **Success Stories**

### ***Hidayto's water woes resolved***

Hidayto is 65 years old and lives in the Andasar village of Bap block with her family. Her family consists of eight members and they own eight goats and one cow. The land the family uses for agriculture is not irrigated, which means they have to work as day labourers when there was no rainfall. Due to a lack of water, it was impossible to practice personal hygiene on a regular basis and walking for water consumed a lot of time as Hidayto typically had to travel 2-3 kilometres one way to fetch water for her basic daily needs. In 2022, Hidayto was selected as a *taanka* beneficiary and consequently a *taanka* was constructed next to her house. She says: "Now I do not have to walk to fetch water from far away and I have time and water to take care of myself. I can now take a bath daily and there is water for washing my clothes, too. The *taanka* has made it possible to cook and eat regularly; before there was no time to prepare meals as most of the females spent the entire day fetching water."

### ***Desilting Nagnaray naadi***

Nagnaray *naadi* in the village of Kolu Nimbayat was first constructed by the local Rajput community about 80 years ago. This *naadi* is also known as Dhola naadi because it produces white mud. *Naadis* frequently need desilting to keep their water holding capacity at a maximum and to ensure a good quality of the harvested rainwater. In 2023, GRAVIS desilted this *naadi* to ensure that it can fulfill its purpose, which is providing water to 8 surrounding villages for 12 months a year. By desilting Nagnaray *naadi*, GRAVIS increases water security for the neighbouring communities all year around. By holding good quality water for 12 months a year, Nagnaray *naadi*, also positively influences the micro-climate and biodiversity of wildlife and it also provides drinking water for livestock and other animals.

### **(b) Agriculture and animal husbandry**

Agriculture and animal husbandry go hand in hand in the Thar desert as relying on just one source of subsistence income is very risky in such a fragile ecosystem. Both agriculture and

animal husbandry become a burden in the face of a shortage of water and harsh climatic conditions. Falling water tables and increasing amounts of drought years make agriculture very hard when depending only on the meagre rainfall the desert offers. Animals are often in poor condition due to a lack of water, fodder and adequate care.

GRAVIS aids farmers in unlocking traditional wisdom, supports them in seed storing and increasing their yields from rainfed agriculture by building *khadins* (contour bunds) and ensuring access to nutritious food and extra income for the vulnerable population, especially older people, women and children by building Arid Horticulture Units (AHUs) with plants that are possible to cultivate in an arid environment. Animal health in the harsh desert climate is improved by veterinary assistance and by maintaining the purity of local breeds that are suited to the climatic conditions of the Thar. Till date around 7500 khadins have been constructed, nearly 650 community seed banks and 6400 AHUs have been set up, more than 90 pastures developed and around 1900 plots demonstrated with crops.

### ***Achieving food and water security: Tulsı devi's story of perseverance***

Tulsı Devi is a widow from a poor family who has suffered a lot of hardships in her life. After her husband's demise, she has struggled to support her family. She worked as a labourer miles away from her home to fend for her family. To procure water for drinking and household purposes, Tulsı Devi had to travel nearly 5-6 miles. Her eldest son also passed away a few years back, so she had to bear the responsibility for his family too. As of today, Tulsı Devi supports 11 members in her family including 3 women, 1 man, 3 daughters and 4 sons. The area she lives in is very dry and drought prone. The land of her farm is flat and lopsided and therefore it leads to soil erosion, affecting the fertility of the land. This severely impacts the quantum of crop produce in her farm. Tulsı Devi put forth her issue in front of VDC, SHG and ILG in her village. Th VDC member Hurma Devi informed her that GRAVIS, as part of their EWGL project, can provide support for construction of khadin, taankas, beri, AHUs etc.

Tulsı Devi put forth her proposal of khadin construction at her farm in VDC meeting. The VDC approved her proposal and the khadin was constructed in June 2022 at her farm. Tulsı Devi was ecstatic after the construction of khadin and hoped for a good spell of rain so that it could enhance the crop produce in her farm. She was immensely thankful to GRAVIS for providing her with the khadin. The khadin ensured that water is retained in her land, and this has resulted in a 60% increase in yield, as compared to the previous year. The increase in agricultural produce has ensured that Tulsı Devi's income is augmented and strengthened on a long-term basis. The additional income will pave way for improving their standard of living, health and education. The khadin construction will also help the neighbouring farmers in controlling soil erosion from their farms.

### ***Improved nutrition and health with AHUs for elderly women***

If you happen to pass by Sampat Kanwar's residence you would see her busy tending to her plants in the nutrition garden that is filled with fresh fruits and vegetables even under the scorching heat of early summer in the Thar. When the GRAVIS team visited her, she was plucking some green chillies and limes and handing it to a neighbour. The smile on her face exuded satisfaction and confidence.

70 years old Sampat Kanwar resides in Gadna village of Bap block of Jodhpur district in Western Rajasthan. In a family of 6 with strained resources, the family could not invest in nutritious food, especially fruits and vegetables. In July 2020, with the support of Village Development Committee (VDC) and GRAVIS Sampat Kanwar was provided with the essentials to grow a fruit farm consisting of drought resilient fruits including 8 *gunda* plants

(Lasoda), 8 *Ber* plants (Desert plum), 1 drumstick plant (*Moringa oleifera*), 1 lemon plant (*Citrus lemon*) and 2 *Karonda* plants (*Carissa carandas*) along with 15 chain nets, spikey wires and plain wires. Due to good rainfall and maintenance by her, the plants have grown well. Because of the appropriate fencing done, the plants are protected from animals. Inclusion of increased amounts of greens and other vegetables have led to improvement in the health and nutritious status of the entire family, especially of the older people and children.

Sampat Kanwar adds, *“Earlier, fruits were not affordable. Seeing the nutritious fruits grow in my courtyard is like a dream at this age. It is great to see my farm filled with green vegetables, which we could rarely grow previously. With the help of the trainings provided, I now take care of the plants myself. Next month we are expecting excess fruits that we can sell in the markets.”*

### **(c) Health**

Living in harsh climatic conditions without sufficient food and water creates direct and indirect health problems. Malnutrition, undernourishment, abysmal sanitation facilities because of lack of water for hygiene practices, and isolation from medical facilities leads to poor health conditions for many villagers. Lung diseases like silicosis and tuberculosis run rampant among mining communities. GRAVIS has been continuously working to improve the overall wellbeing of the community applying a multifaceted approach. The most obvious of these strategies is providing an affordable and accessible medical facility. We provide grassroots level trainings to Village Health Workers (VHWs) and conduct awareness and outreach medical camps for villagers. We have specific programs designed for women and girls as they are often the most neglected. These programs include pre-natal and post-natal care, training camps on girl child nutrition and family planning seminars. In rural India, the ageing process and related problems start earlier due to the hard lives people have to lead. Older people often suffer from malnutrition or undernourishment for various reasons. They also often lack the physical capability of maintaining the most basic of hygiene standards. In addition to their physical impairments, the elderly often live isolated lives and suffer from mental health problems like depression due to loneliness. GRAVIS aims at improving older people's lives not only by providing them with nutrition and more economic security but also by organizing them in Village Older People's Associations (VOPAs) and Intergenerational Learning Groups (ILGs) highlighting their presence and contributions to the society. Till date more than 4,50,000 patients have been treated and more than 3,20,000 people have been educated on health.

#### ***Eyesight of Luni Devi restored***

60-year-old Luni Devi from the Osian block of Jodhpur district is now living her life with confidence. She is no more dependent on anybody and is able to move around without any worry of falling down or losing her balance. It wasn't like this before a year.

Luni devi shifted to live with her son and his family after she lost her husband. Financially, their situation is not sound as her son barely manages to make ends meet as a wage labourer. One day she realized that something was wrong with her vision and while she did not pay heed to it immediately it so happened that her condition worsened to an extent that all she could spot was a faint ray of light. By now, almost a year had elapsed and she had become dependent on others for her daily chores. Living had become quite burdensome for her.

She decided to visit GRAVIS' outreach health camp where doctors referred her to the GRAVIS hospital for diagnosis. After thorough examination, it was found that cataract in her right eye was obliterating her vision and if not operated soon enough she would lose her eyesight. Couple of years ago she was operated on her left eye. This time it was her right eye that required operation.

Following this, she was admitted in the GRAVIS hospital at Tinwari where she underwent her eye surgery. Later the team paid visits at her home to evaluate her progress. She recovered well and both her eyes are functional now. She is able to do all her routine work with restored vision. She thanked GRAVIS immensely for restoring her vision.

### ***Rewat Singh breathes a sigh of relief***

Ghewra village in the Osian Block of Jodhpur district is one of the targeted project areas of GRAVIS for various health programmes. When the project team reached the village for conducting the medical camp, one of the villagers informed the team about the serious condition of 75-year-old Rewat Singh who was suffering from a very painful bed sore. Assuming that this could be something that needs urgent attention, the team immediately visited him. After examining him they suggested that he should be taken to the GRAVIS hospital in Tinwari as soon as possible. Rewat Singh's son did as he was instructed and took him to the hospital. He was aware about a similar case of an 85-year-old female from his village and that she was under supervision at the GRAVIS hospital for 2 months till she was cured and hence had immense faith on GRAVIS' team of doctors.

Rewat Singh was at the hospital facility for a month wherein the staff took extra care of him as his wound was very deep and it needed time to heal. In the beginning the staff would clean and dress his wound 4 times a day. After 2 weeks as some healing was observed they continued to dress his wound 3 times a day. By the end of the month, his condition improved and he had recovered phenomenally. He was discharged from the hospital with instructions of proper aftercare.

### ***Leela Devi benefits from maternal and child health programmes of GRAVIS***

22-year-old Leela was married at an early age to Gumana Ram, resident of Diggari village, Jodhpur district. Until now she has delivered 4 children of which only 2 have survived. Her first two deliveries were administered at home without any medical supervision and proper care. This led to several complications, especially during her second delivery which put her life to risk as well. Both her children from the first 2 deliveries did not survive and they died within 3 and 5 days of their birth respectively. The VHW trained by GRAVIS from her village got to know about this and counselled her on how to ensure proper care and symptoms to watch for during and after pregnancy as well as discussed about the importance of institutional delivery. Next time when Leela Devi got pregnant the VHW ensured that she attends every ANC camp organized by GRAVIS. These camps included discussion and awareness on various topics like nutrition during pregnancy and after delivery, vaccinations for the mother and child at regular intervals, post-natal care for both mother and child as well as proper rest during pregnancy. It was only through these awareness sessions she understood the importance of regular check-ups, tests and consultation with the doctors.

When asked about her experience with the camps she said, *“I had lost 2 children because of negligence at multiple levels and I did not wish to repeat the same mistakes again. I had lived through the lack of proper medical assistance and know what it is like to endure that. So, when I conceived the third time, I decided to take proper medication and utmost care of myself and my unborn child. I chose institutional delivery over home deliveries. My last two deliveries were administered in hospitals without any complications and I gave birth to two healthy children. Camps conducted by GRAVIS made me aware about the dos and don'ts to consider during pregnancy and I am thankful to the VHW and GRAVIS team for that.”*

#### **(d) Education**

Formal, consistent education is a challenge in an environment, in which basic needs are often not met and have to be taken care of first. Women in rural India are often confined to their homes with no agency whatsoever by cultural boundaries, forced to endure hard physical labor

of fetching water walking long distances, trapped with other domestic tasks throughout the day and are still treated as less than men in almost every way. Devoid of opportunities to educate themselves, young girls of poor families are forced to marry in their teens to avoid paying a high dowry. They are often not enrolled in schools or drop out during drought years. To break this cycle, GRAVIS provides children with studying materials, teachers, uniforms and often also transport to the nearest school. Making water available at the house frees up a lot of time for women and girls and GRAVIS ensures that this newly-won time is used for school education for girls and vocational training for women to improve their independence and socio-economic situation overall. Till date, over 110 schools have been set up with over 8,500 students receiving education.

### ***Light and hope in Usha's life***

The first thought occupying Tejo Devi and Usha's minds after they get up in the morning would be about sourcing and collecting water for their family's drinking and washing needs and other household chores. Tejo Devi has spent her entire life living through this back-breaking drudgery and Usha, her 15-year-old daughter also had to go through the same routine of fetching water from wells and ponds. This, in addition to helping her mother with other domestic chores until GRAVIS intervened with its education and water support initiatives. Tejo Devi's family belongs to an extremely underprivileged and oppressed Meghwal community. They reside in Nagnechi Nagar village which is 40 kms away from the Phalodi town of Jodhpur district. Their main source of income generation is through mining activities and rain-fed agriculture.

Fetching water is a laborious exercise and because of that Usha would neglect going to school. Her attendance had decreased tremendously over a period of few years. With the support of interventions launched by GRAVIS, USHA is now able to attend her school regularly and concentrate on studying with a carefree mind. There is a taanka (underground drinking water storage tank) built near her house. This has not only made her family water secure but also has reduced her drudgery of fetching water to a great extent. Currently, she is in the 9<sup>th</sup> standard and uses her bicycle to cover the 6 km long distance to reach her school. Earlier she would commute to her school on foot. Her attendance has surprisingly improved as per the latest records from her school. In the evening once she is back home, she uses the solar kit to study. When the team at GRAVIS met Usha, she fondly said, *"I feel that I have wings now. My life has become easier with the bicycle. I go to school on it and use it to move around for other chores. The bicycle scholarship and the solar kit have made me happy and changed my life for better. I want to study more and do good. I am very thankful for this help to me and my family."*

#### **(e) Community mobilisation**

Self-reliant communities can only exist if their individuals collaborate and respect each other's interests. To mobilise and organise different members of society, GRAVIS promotes various community-based organisations. These organisations decide on priorities for interventions, set goals, mobilise resources and come up with plans and ideas how to achieve their goals. CBOs are invaluable to the communities' well-being and have been at the very foundation of every project ever since the start of GRAVIS' work with the remote communities in the Thar. Over the years GRAVIS has established several CBOs to represent as many different groups of society as possible. These groups have taken several forms - Village Development Committees (VDCs), Village Education Committees (VECs), Village Older People Associations (VOPAs), Self Help Groups (SHGs), Intergenerational Learning Groups (ILGs) and Farmers' Interest Groups (FIGs). In all mixed-gender CBOs, it is mandatory to have 50% representation of women to ensure their equal participation in the collective decision making and developmental processes. GRAVIS currently works with over 1000 VDCs, 2200 SHGs, 400 VOPAs, 180 ILGs and 135 Farmer Clubs.

### ***Susiya, an emerging ILG Leader***

Susiya is a 38 year old woman who is the secretary of Gogagi ILG of Patrasar village, Barmer district. The financial condition of her family is poor. She lives in a kuccha house with her parents and two married brothers. They own livestock and do farming for a living. She herself chose not to marry and dedicate her life to social service in her village. She states that even though girls in her village are not allowed to study, go outside of their houses, meet people or attend any meeting, I at an early age had decided to work for the betterment of our society.

She had an active role in convincing nearly 28 girls who had dropped out from their schools to re-join and start afresh. Susiya expresses that in all these years she had been working alone for the betterment of the community. Now, being a part of the Gogagi ILG, she feels that she has got a bigger platform to work with all the women and girls of her group. Susiya has played a major role in convincing the women and girls to become members of ILGs in her village.

It is because of her that other members, both young and old, have voluntarily started attending these meetings. Susiya has also helped members in her ILG to apply for Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) (scheme for housing for below poverty line families) and procure work under the MGNREGA. In addition, she along with Gogagi ILG members closely monitor various activities taken up under development projects. The other ILG members see Susiya as a leader. Susiya is indeed an inspiration for the younger girls in the all the ILGs in her village.

### **(f) Research and advocacy**

Research and advocacy are integral to the work we do. Through action research projects we try to understand and document our learning, processes, outcomes, emerging needs as well as ways to modify our programmes to maximise the impact. We focus on educating the community on their rights and advocating for their entitlements by organizing and participating in seminars, workshops and awareness campaigns. Through advocacy, we work towards raising attention on community needs and motivate the most vulnerable in the Thar, especially women, elderly and mineworkers to raise their voice and challenge the status quo. As a result of many research interventions, we publish several studies and lead many advocacy campaigns every year.

#### *Advocacy success for mineworkers' entitlements:*

In the arena of mineworkers' entitlements, perhaps more than any other area in which GRAVIS' works, advocacy is an essential tool. The challenges faced by the mining communities are enormous and GRAVIS has been working to garner public recognition for these problems for decades. Following the initial round-table conferences GRAVIS combined its community-based efforts with a broader outreach initiative. This has included informing the workers of their rights; lobbying the owners and government officials to enforce the laws; organizing a system for workers to win compensation for injuries; and documenting the working conditions so as to educate the public. By holding awareness camps, free medical exams, and distributing tools, GRAVIS has involved the workers and demonstrated the direct benefit of joining with the efforts of the union. Working with its partners, GRAVIS has organized numerous rallies and public meetings in order to initiate dialogues. These events occur regularly throughout the year, cultivating a sense of civic participation and collective action.

A variety of conferences, workshops and events open to the public seek to raise broader awareness of the mineworkers' conditions and the provisions and statutes designed to protect them. GRAVIS efforts also include Public Interest Litigation and lobbying with the state medical board to fulfill its responsibilities. Through these venues, GRAVIS has forged alliances with government officials, social activists, and journalists dedicated to reforming the mining process in Rajasthan.

Specifically, the interests of the mineworkers and the provisions of the law intersect regarding claims for compensation. GRAVIS has filed petitions in court against the mine owners, arguing that they should compensate the workers for accidents that lead to injury and death. Each patient

that develops silicosis needs certification in order to receive compensation. GRAVIS has also arranged legal counsel for miners, when necessary, and induced the mine owners to add the required safety equipment to their worksites.

GRAVIS has undertaken several surveys and research projects to [document](#) the situation. GRAVIS then disseminates these materials to government offices, local development agencies, the media, and other concerned parties. Through these efforts, GRAVIS has brought the plight of the mineworkers to the attention of several human rights commissions in India and abroad and will continue to do so in the future combining community-based action as well as state, national and international level advocacy efforts.

## **Milestones of GRAVIS' journey**

### **Establishment Phase (1983 – 1992)**

- L. C. Tyagi and Shashi Tyagi founded GRAVIS.
- GRAVIS initiated its work in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan, and established ties with local communities.
- Forged the fundamental work philosophy to remain in direct contact with the community always.
- Focused on forming Community Based Organizations like Village Development Committees and Self-Help Groups organizing people to get involved in their own affairs.
- GRAVIS began working primarily on water and agricultural issues.
- Commenced health, education and gender equality interventions for the most vulnerable citizens of Thar.
- First field center of GRAVIS was established at Gagadi with the assistance of community members and local officials.

### **Consolidation Phase (1993 – 2002)**

- GRAVIS strengthened its infrastructure and formed links with partners working in the area and beyond.
- Broadened the scope of its activities and spread its presence in various districts where the Thar desert is located.
- A number of field centers were set up to co-ordinate activities within communities.
- Became the founding member of Rajasthan Voluntary Health Association and deeply forayed into health initiatives by embedding network of Village Health Workers.
- GRAVIS hospital built and established to make healthcare accessible and affordable.
- Initiated working with the mineworkers of Rajasthan. Launched Mine Labor Protection Campaign (MLPC) and the first mine workers' trade union in Jodhpur.

Expanded assortment of training sessions, workshops and public events to spread knowledge about its work across India.

### **Expansion Phase (2003 – 2012)**

- GRAVIS matured into a development organization with a robust network of support and remarkable gains in the areas of watershed development, natural resource management and people's organization.
- Accounting, Information technology and telecommunications infrastructure strengthened.
- GRAVIS launched its website.

- Facilities in the Thar expanded. A museum, multi-functional educational center and a storage warehouse was established.
- Initiated documentation of traditional know-how of local communities on farming practices and water harvesting technologies in the Thar region of Rajasthan.
- 2003 - Millennium ICRISAT Science Award for Outstanding Partnership by International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics.
- 2005 - Community Welfare Award for Sustainable development, empowering women and child education by Indian Merchants' Chamber.
- 2009 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Dalmiya Paryavaran Award for Best work on - Water and environment conservation by Ramkrishna Jaidayal Dalmia Seva Sansthan.
- 2011 - Sprit of Humanity Award for Best work on Women's Health Category by AmeriCares INDIA.

### Scale-up Phase (2013 – 2023)

- GRAVIS extended its operations to rural areas of Uttarakhand and Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh States of India.
- 2014 – 2017 – GRAVIS appointed as the Innovation and Knowledge Partner in disseminating rainwater harvesting techniques and sustainable agricultural practices in the East African Countries.
- 2017 – Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Outstanding Contribution in the Field of Constructive Work by Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation.
- 2022 - Rashtriya Mahatma Gandhi Samman 2021 for encouraging education, empowering women health and sanitation, harmony & culture, social inclusion, self-reliant community through Gandhian Philosophy by Government of Madhya Pradesh.
- GRAVIS' community outreach efforts intensified in this phase. Touched lives of more than 2 million people, over 75,000 families across 2000 villages with the support of over 4,000 CBOs.

## Way forward

Four decades of GRAVIS' interventions in the development space symbolize continuous dedication, growth, and resilience in aiding marginalized communities. By surmounting diverse challenges of working in the harshest climatic zones within the country, the organization has consistently evolved, initiating new projects and endeavours, steadily marching towards enhancement and progress each passing day.

Over the years, we have strengthened the leadership of vulnerable sections in the society, especially older people and women by ensuring their ownership and participation in various development initiatives. We deeply believe in creating and implementing innovative approaches for the benefit of rural communities. Climate change adaptation through intergenerational solidarity, community-led forestry, and community-based long-term healthcare have been some of the many innovations that were introduced by GRAVIS in the recent years.

Going forward, we wish to expand our efforts in the areas of water security, health and climate resilient livelihoods as climate change continues to adversely impact rural India with its serious effects. In the coming years, GRAVIS will continue to grow by holding fast to its Gandhian roots and with activities specifically tailored to the environment and culture of the rural communities it supports.







## **Background of the Organization**

Established in 1983, the Consumer Unity & Trust Society (CUTS) began as a rural development communication initiative and has evolved into a leading voice on trade, regulation, and governance in India and globally. With over 100 staff from diverse backgrounds, CUTS works towards its Vision of ‘*Consumer Sovereignty*’ and Mission of ‘*Consumer Sovereignty in the Framework of Social Justice, Economic Equality and Environmental Balance, Within and Across Borders*’.

CUTS operates from multiple centres in India, Africa, Vietnam, Switzerland, and the USA. It addresses economic governance issues through research-based advocacy and connects grassroots efforts with national and international policymaking.

- **Target Population:** Description of the communities and demographics the organization aims to serve.

CUTS International operates in over 40 countries, focusing on marginalised groups like women, youth, and smallholder farmers. By addressing economic disparities and advocating for inclusive growth, they engage with local stakeholders to promote equitable policies and sustainable development, ensuring their initiatives benefit low-income communities and support broader economic resilience and social justice.

- **Support Entities:** Details of partnerships and support from governmental, non-governmental, and international entities.

## **Development Partners**

We have received or are receiving funds for various projects from the following donors:

### **Government Sector**

#### ***Indian***

- Government of India, Government of Rajasthan, Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India, Reserve Bank of India

#### ***Foreign***

- British High Commission, India, Canadian International Development Agency, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, UK, Government of Sweden, Government of The Netherlands, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, Swedish International Development Agency, The European Commission, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (various agencies), World Health Organisation, Department of State, United States of America, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (various countries)

### **Non-Government Sector/International Agencies**

- Asian Development Bank, Philippines, Australian Centre for International, Agricultural Research, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, USA, Consumers International, UK,

Centre for WTO Studies, India, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, Germany, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, India, Global Health Advocacy Incubator, USA, Global Road Safety Partnership, Switzerland, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, India, IKEA Foundation, The Netherlands, International Development Research Centre, Canada, Institute of International Education, USA, Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs, India, International Finance Corporation, USA, Integrated Research for Action and Development, India, International Road Transport Union, Switzerland, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, India, NOVIB, The Netherlands, Norwegian Institute for Consumer Research, Norway, Oxfam GB, UK, Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development, France, Partnership for Transparency Fund, USA, Public Affairs Centre, India, Save the Children, India, Sightsavers, India, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics & Environment, Nepal, Shakti Sustainable Energy Foundation, India, South Asian Forum for Infrastructure Regulation, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, Sweden, The Ford Foundation, India and USA, The Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, Thailand, The John D. Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, USA, The Asia Foundation, India, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, India and USA, The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, The World Bank, India and USA

### **Profile of Core Members:**

**Pradeep S Mehta**, founder Secretary General of CUTS International, serves on the WTO DG's NGO Advisory Board and G20/B20's Council on Africa. He has roles with GOI's Board of Trade and Better Regulatory Advisory Group. A renowned columnist, he has received several awards, including the 2023 Business World Social Impact Award.

**Bipul Chattopadhyay** has over 27 years of experience in international trade, transport, and regional integration across South Asia, focusing currently on Indo-Pacific connectivity and trade.

**Amrat Singh**, Director at CUTS has over 20 years of experience in governance, consumer protection, and sustainable development and holds a Master's in Social Work.

**Varidhi Singh**, Adviser at CUTS, has an M.A. in Social Work and a B.A. in Math, Economics, and Computer Applications, offering expertise in social sciences and quantitative disciplines.

**Gauhar Mahmood**, Assistant Director at CUTS, has 23 years of experience in grassroots initiative planning, project development, capacity building, and programme evaluation in the development sector.

### **Thematic Engagements:**

**Education:** CUTS facilitated the enrollment of children, including school dropouts, into government schools by raising awareness about the importance of education in marginalised communities.

**Healthcare:** Our Centre at Chittorgarh is working on more than 500 villages in Chittorgarh and adjoining districts on the rights and responsibilities of rural consumers, particularly on reproductive and child health.

**Women Empowerment:** CUTS enabled rural women through programmes like 'Nai Roshni' and the PRIYADARSHINI Model SHGs Project. By forming Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and providing skill training and mentoring, CUTS has enhanced women's economic independence and community roles, significantly improving their socioeconomic status.

**Environmental Conservation:** CUTS has actively participated in environmental conservation initiatives in Rajasthan's Chittorgarh district through the National Environment Awareness Campaign, a Ministry of Environment and Forests programme to raise environmental awareness and inspire action.

### **Milestones:**

- Recognising CUTS' contribution to urban governance, the Government of Rajasthan conferred the Swachh Rajasthan Award, 2016, on CUTS. Vasundhara Raje, the then Chief Minister of Rajasthan, presented the award at a state-level function held at Udaipur on December 22, 2016.
- Received appreciation from the District Election Commission, Chittorgarh, for effective interventions in electoral registration – meaningful and high voter turnout with greater participation from persons with disability.
- Bhilwara district administration in southern Rajasthan, India, applauded CUTS' work on 'CHILDLINE 1098'.
- Ratni Bai Khatik, a CUTS networker, won the international "Creativity of Women in Rural Life" award in 2002 from the Women World Summit Foundation in Geneva.
- Reshma, benefiting from CUTS' SHG initiative, started poultry and sewing businesses with a Rs4500 loan, significantly improving her family's income and quality of life.
- At UNICEF's "Ladli Samman" event, three CUTS-supported girls were recognised for overcoming barriers to promoting girl-child equality.
- Netawalgarh Pachhli, a community that lacked proper healthcare, saw a significant improvement in its situation. Our Mother and Child Healthcare (MCHC) grassroots initiative raised awareness about healthcare services among women and villagers. The community's recognition of the need for more healthcare centres led to government support for establishing additional centres, a sign of our impact.

### **Specialization and Unique Characteristics:**

Founded in 1983, CUTS International has become a leading think-tank advocating for global consumer rights, social justice, and inclusive growth. It uses a unique RANC approach—Research, Advocacy, Networking, and Capacity Building—to ensure its policy recommendations are evidence-based and impactful. CUTS connects grassroots communities to national and international policymaking, promoting economic equality, environmental balance, and sustainable development.

### **Organizational Impact:**

*CUTS has significantly impacted through its diverse initiatives, focusing on socio-economic inclusion and protection for marginalised communities.*

- **Empowerment of Disabled People Organisations (DPOs):** CUTS improved economic security and accessibility for disabled individuals, enhancing public building access, assistive devices, and support for medical and educational needs.
- **Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs):** CUTS boosted small farmers' incomes and efficiency by improving value addition and market access, fostering economic stability and solidarity.
- **Child Protection and Rights:** Initiatives like Asha Kiran and Child Line 1098 improved educational access, tackled child labour, and provided emergency support, safeguarding vulnerable children's rights and well-being.

*CUTS has made impressive strides in various areas, delivering significant positive outcomes for diverse communities.*

**Support for People with Disabilities:** Over 5,000 PwDs gained access to education, healthcare, pensions, assistive devices, and travel passes.

**Community Kitchen Initiative:** Operated by PwDs, this kitchen has served over 1.5 million meals since August 2020, earning state-level recognition.

**Women Empowerment:** Trained over 10,000 women in financial management, digital literacy, leadership, and legal rights through SHGs.

**Farmer Producer Organisations:** CUTS established 36 FPOs, benefiting 20,000 small and marginal farmers, including women, and promoting sustainable farming practices for community well-being.

## **Learnings:**

*Through its experiences, CUTS has gained valuable insights into what drives effective and sustainable community interventions.*

- **Field-Based Learning:** CUTS adopts a bottom-up approach, engaging communities in identifying and addressing local issues through meetings and programmes.
- **Leveraging Community Resources:** CUTS actively involves local assets to enhance the relevance and sustainability of its interventions, fostering community ownership and long-term commitment.
- **Educational Campaigns:** Recognising that awareness alone is insufficient, CUTS conducts extensive campaigns to bridge the gap between knowledge and action, empowering consumers to resolve issues effectively.

## **Success Stories:**

*CUTS has achieved substantial progress in promoting organic agriculture and establishing FPOs in Rajasthan.*

- **Organic Agriculture Advancement**

**Consumer Awareness and Adoption:** Over 1,500 awareness sessions, CUTS reached over 100,000 individuals to enhance consumer knowledge about organic products.

**Farmer Training and Composting:** Approximately 3,000 farmers received training in organic farming practices. CUTS set up 50 compost cells, leading to a notable reduction in chemical-based farming. This shift has contributed to increased market prices for organic produce.

- **Establishment and Development of FPOs**

**Formation and Expansion:** Since April 2021, CUTS successfully established 36 FPOs across five districts in Rajasthan. They are supported by agencies such as SFAC, NABARD, and NCDC, and have identified 36 clusters, mobilised communities, and registered on various platforms.

**Training and Capacity Building:** Over 300 board members and farmer groups have been trained. CUTS developed comprehensive business plans, improved infrastructure, and secured financial resources and market linkages for these FPOs.

- **Recognition and Impact**

**Recognition:** The success of CUTS' initiatives has garnered national and local acclaim. Farmers Jagdish Prasad Parikh and Hukum Chand Patidaar received the Padma Shri in 2019 for their contributions to organic farming, and the Agriculture Department of Rajasthan honoured six other farmers.

**Transition to Organic Farming:** Over the past decade, about 180 farmers have transitioned from chemical to organic farming. **Market Impact:** 36 FPOs have improved the marketability of produce.

*CUTS’ initiatives have significantly transformed farming practices and market dynamics in Rajasthan. Farmers’ recognition and the successful integration of organic farming practices underscore the profound impact of CUTS’ work.*

• **Policy Advocacy and Implementation**

**School Nutrition Guidelines:** Played a crucial role in encouraging the Government of India to implement School Nutrition Guidelines, promoting organic gardens in schools to foster sustainable practices and environmental awareness among students.

**Pesticide Management Bill, 2020:** Contributed significantly to the development of this bill, which regulates pesticide use to enhance safety and protect farmers, advancing agricultural sustainability.

**Rajasthan’s Organic Policy 2017:** Advocacy was pivotal in implementing this policy, which supports and expands organic farming practices in Rajasthan, boosting the organic agriculture sector and its value chain.

**Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana:** Influenced this national scheme designed to support organic farming and value chain development, promoting organic practices across India.

**Organic Sections in Vegetable Markets:** Facilitated the creation of dedicated organic sections in vegetable markets throughout Rajasthan, improving market access for organic producers and broadening consumer choice.

• **Societal Change and Local Impact**

**Accessibility Improvements:** Through social audits of government buildings, the organisation identified the need for better accessibility features. As a result, lifts and ramps were installed in various buildings, improving access for PwDs.

**Public Health Centre Advocacy:** Supported a successful advocacy campaign led by women in Netawalgarh Pachli *Gram Panchayat*. The campaign established a public health centre that benefits the local and surrounding ten villages. This achievement underscores the organisation's commitment to inclusive development and community welfare.

**Other Successes:** Any additional notable achievements or testimonies that highlight the organization’s contributions.

- One SHG received a State Award from the National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development for its ironsmith work, significantly boosting its members' income.
- Another SHG earned the State-level Amrata Award for outstanding promotion.
- The Disabled People Organisation, supported by CUTS, received a State Award for enhancing accessibility to government schemes for PwDs.
- A Community Kitchen Programme run by this organisation provided 1.5 million low-cost meals during and after the pandemic and earned state and regional awards for its impact on community welfare.





# Seva Mandir

Transforming lives through democratic and participatory development

## Background of the Organization

Seva Mandir, a non-profit organization based in Udaipur, Rajasthan, was founded in 1968 by Dr. Mohan Sinha Mehta, a distinguished ambassador and educator. Initially focused on adult education, its aim was to equip the region's predominantly tribal population with skills for self-development and leadership. To address the need for a collective vision, Seva Mandir expanded its efforts to include natural resource development and women's empowerment. Over time, its initiatives grew to encompass primary education, healthcare, and early childhood development, later extending to peri-urban and urban slum areas, all rooted in community participation and Gandhian principles of constructive work.

**Target Population:** Description of the communities and demographics the organization aims to serve.

Seva Mandir operates across 24 Panchayat Samitis/Blocks in five districts of southern Rajasthan, as well as in the slum areas of Udaipur city. It serves over 1 million people in 1,569 villages, where more than 70% of the population depends on subsistence agriculture, and most live below the poverty line. For 56 years, Seva Mandir has focused on empowering the most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities, working in some of India's most backward regions, including Kotra, which ranks 23rd on the national backwardness index.

**Support Entities:** Details of partnerships and support from governmental, non-governmental, and international entities.

Seva Mandir receives funding from Indian and international agencies, corporates, foundations, and individuals. Corporate donors include Larsen & Toubro, AXIS Bank Foundation, HDFC Bank Foundation, Bajaj, etc. While past institutional supporters include Plan International and Bread for the world and others (25+ corporates). Unrestricted donations to Seva Mandir's central fund provide flexibility to address urgent needs and sustain ongoing projects. Non-financial support, such as technical expertise, academic & research partnerships with institutions like Georgetown University, IIM Udaipur, and J-PAL, enhances their work. Friends of Seva Mandir in the UK and USA also support through fundraising, volunteering, and knowledge-sharing.

## Profile of Core Members

**Janat Shah** – President, Board of Trustees since 2017; former Director of IIM Udaipur and former Professor at IIM Bangalore. He also holds a special professorship at Nottingham University Business School, UK, and is an expert in operations management.

**Ajay S. Mehta** – Member, Board of Trustees; Chief Executive of Seva Mandir (1990-1999). He had served as the Executive Director of the National Foundation for India for a decade. Additionally, he has held the position of President of the Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur. He actively contributes to several government committees, leveraging his extensive experience in development and governance.

**Suraj Jacob** – Member, Board of Trustees, since May 2021; Former Chief Executive of Vidya Bhawan Society (2017-2019). He operates as a faculty at Pomona College, James Madison University, and as a political economist is affiliated with Azim Premji University.

**Neelima Khetan** – Member, Board of Trustees, since March 2024; Former Chief Executive of Seva Mandir (1999-2011). She has held leadership positions in both non-profit and for-profit organisations. She operates as an independent consultant at present.

**Pamela Philipose** – Member, Board of Trustees, since 2013; Senior Research Fellow at Indian Council of Social Science Research and was a Director of Women’s Feature Service. She has worked with the Times of India, Indian Express, Sunday observer, and Eve’s Weekly.

**Dr. Laxmi Jhala** – Co-opted Member, Board of Trustees; Managing Trustee of AlakhNayan Mandir Eye Institute, Udaipur, is a dedicated leader in eye care and healthcare advocacy. She serves on the Executive Council of the Eye Bank Society of Rajasthan (Udaipur Chapter) and heads the Healthcare Council of WICCI, Rajasthan. Her tireless efforts are transforming lives through improved health access.

**Sara Rai** – Co-opted Member, Board of Trustees; A distinguished writer and translator, known for works like “Raw Umber” and “Ababil ki Udaan”. She writes in Hindi and English, and translates Urdu stories into English. Her work reflects India's rich pluralistic culture and her deep respect for linguistic diversity.

**Ronak Shah** – Chief Executive (2018-Present). An alumnus of L.D. College of Engineering, CEPT, and the University of Manchester (IDPM), Ronak Shah has over 25 years of experience in the development sector. Since joining Seva Mandir in 2007, he has worked on water, sanitation, climate change, and energy issues in rural areas. He had previously led Udaipur Urja Initiatives, focusing on cooking technology and carbon finance advancements.

**Narendra Jain** – General Secretary (2022-Present). A Post Graduate in Agriculture with specialization in Plant Breeding and Genetics from Rajasthan Agriculture University, Bikaner. He joined Seva Mandir in 1991, focusing on afforestation and pastureland development. He has served as Secretary in multiple blocks and as Director of Operations in Seva Mandir.

## Thematic Engagements

Seva Mandir engages in improving capabilities through early childcare & nutrition, education, youth & women’s empowerment, and WASH initiatives. They strengthen livelihoods by enhancing rural agriculture, supporting small farmers, and developing varied natural resources. These efforts aim to foster community well-being, sustainable development, and resilience to the adverse impacts of climate change.

## Milestones

1968: Conceived in the 1930s, the organisation was founded in 1968 by Dr Mohan Sinha Mehta. Initially, Seva Mandir's work focused on adult education, with the aim of equipping the rural, predominantly tribal citizens of this area with the skills that would enable them to become active agents of their own development.

The focus was on preparing leaders to work on development issues in partnership with the government, and many individuals went on to work in bodies such as the [panchayats](#).

Over the years, however, it became clear that this work was not contributing enough to bringing change on the ground due to fragmentation, different frictions and a lack of vision for collective development. Collective leadership built on inclusive and participatory processes was needed to address the challenges. Seva Mandir responded by diversifying its repertoire of activities and became engaged in natural resource development and women's empowerment work.

In subsequent decades, this has expanded to include a wide range of activities: primary education, health, early childhood care and development, all implemented by means of our engagement with the community institutions which form the bedrock of all Seva Mandir's work, and within a framework based on the Gandhian notion of constructive work

1973: Established the Kunjru Library to support youth career advancement, serving 350 students annually with a wide range of educational materials.

1988: Sadhna, a Women's Handicraft Enterprise, was established by Seva Mandir in response to a severe drought in Mewar. Initially formed as an income generation program to support affected families, Sadhna has since achieved registration under the Mutual Benefit Trust Act after years of dedicated effort.

1998: Formed the Van Utthan Sangh (VUS), a network of 105 village-level Forest Protection Committees, promoting sustainable communal forest management. Recipient of the National Biodiversity Award.

2004: Started the Short-Stay Home (SSH) in Udaipur, offering shelter and comprehensive support services to women and girls facing violence. Started runs two Childline centers in Udaipur, to provide children with a 24/7 tele-helpline

2014: Udaipur Urja Initiatives (UUI) Producer Company Limited, incubated and promoted by Seva Mandir. It has since established ethical markets for clean technology products and agro-produce, benefiting poor and marginalized communities, creating income opportunities for over 150 tribal women across five blocks in Udaipur district.

2016: Integrated Early Childcare and Nutrition (ECC&N) programs to address malnutrition through a multi-faceted approach, significantly improving child health and community knowledge. Seva Mandir expanded its work on early child and started work with government Anganwadis. We worked with 1,355 AWs initially for 6 years, benefitting more than 1 lakh children. Currently, reaching out to 542 Aaws.

2018: The "Aamiwada Satyagrah" movement in Udaipur enabled community access to forest resources, enhancing local ownership and promoting sustainable income-generating activities. 16 villages, launched a satyagraha on February 21 after the local administration refused to give permission to cut bamboo.

2021: Created the Aravalli Lok Samiti Federation to support sustainability and Gram Swaraj in older project villages.

**Aravalli Lok Samiti Federation (ALSF)** provides support to all village groups in Seva Mandir's working area. ALSF was formed to enable continuous support to the village groups and ensure sustainability of community-led initiatives.



Federations leaders under the umbrella of ALSF are resolving social issues, raising debates on common asset sustainability, utilization of village fund, leveraging with Panchayats, establishing linkages with market etc.

## Specialization and Unique Characteristics

Seva Mandir focuses & specializes not only in community mobilization but also in strengthening village democracy, embracing Gandhian ideals to empower communities through inclusive decision-making. Our distinctive approach includes establishing & capacitating Community Institutions, promoting self-sufficiency, and implementing integrated livelihoods. Active women and youth participation in various interventions and initiatives like Van Utthan Sangh & Farmer Field Schools further highlight our innovative, resource-efficient methods.

## Organizational Impact

### Case Study 1 Amivada Satyagraha

Facing govt inaction, tribal farmers in Rajasthan harvest bamboo on their own as they call it, is not only a story of bamboo harvest but one of poor peasants showing the way of self-governance and taking on moral responsibility of protecting their commons. In the nondescript Rajasthan Amivada village, in Jhadol block in Udaipur, marginal tribal farmers created history by harvesting bamboo grass in the last week of February. The importance of this otherwise non-eventful regular farming procedure lies in the fact that they planted the bamboo themselves in abandoned and degraded pasture land, as a collective community, without any help from the government. “This initiative by the villagers signifies a peaceful assertion of their responsibility over their resources, and products such as bamboo, which has huge economic significance for these marginalised and tribal communities,” Tara Chand Garasia, the Sarpanch of Amivada village, says. A collective effort Once a degraded rocky and barren space, Amivada is now a forest of bamboos. This transformation from barren to greenland is a result of 15 years of hard work of the villagers. Since 2003, the Amivada Gram Samuh has protected, managed and developed 16 hectares of pasture land through the collective efforts by the village community. In the barren and degraded lands, the tribal community planted bamboo as a chief crop for primarily two reasons— high investment returns and for personal usage. “We took this step as bamboo is suitable for the area, as well as for economic returns that bamboo grass offers,” Devi Lal, President of Village Gram Samuh, says. By 2016, these bamboo plants matured and were ready to be harvested. The bamboo could either be used by villagers themselves or could be sold, which could essentially supplement meagre earnings. The other livelihood opportunities available in the village is farming and livestock rearing. If it was not harvested on time, there would have been a chance of loss in the productivity of bamboo by rotting and decay. There was also the risk of theft, Devi Lal adds. Satyagraha movement According to the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, bamboo harvesting can be done only by Gram Sabhas under the supervision of the Forest Department. The farmers from the Amivada village made repeated requests for two years to no avail. But instead of protesting, they decided to undertake the activity of harvesting themselves at their own expense. Carried out under the leadership of local development platforms, like Van Utthan Sansthan, the villagers launched a simultaneous bamboo harvesting drive in all these sites, with 2,000 people participating. Calling this harvest period as a Satyagraha movement Tara Chand adds, “As it happened that when we decided to go ahead with our Satyagraha to harvest bamboo, an official clarification was received from the government just a day before we started this initiative.” As a symbolic gesture, 14 other villages from four blocks, participated in this initiative in their respective villages by harvesting bamboo. Forty-year-old farmer Sapna Kumar says, “This is not a protest against the government. We call it a Satyagraha because it is about the truth that governance of

commons by the community can go a long way in transforming the mindsets of the people. Through this movement, a precedence for such community-led initiatives has been set.” Today, the harvest is worth approximately Rs 4 lakh. The money generated will be used for developing the boundary wall of the pastures, and for building irrigation facilities. Otherwise, the average income of a farmer, by harvesting wheat and a few vegetables, in this region is a mere Rs 2,000 per month.

### **Case Study 2- Delawas Water Initiative: Easing Women’s Lives**

In Delawas village of Gogunda block, 58 tribal families relied on a single shared open well for their water needs. However, distance to the well and manual drawing of water was challenging for women, who had to spend 15-20 minutes per trip, totaling about 1.5 to 2 hours daily. Moreover, the water was often contaminated with run-off coming in the well.

A tank of 7,000 liters with 4 standposts for drinking and cooking water was constructed and connected to the well. An electric motor was put up to fill the tank, a parapet wall was constructed to prevent dirt from falling, and a pulley was installed to ease drawing of water. The water is now filtered and chlorinated during seasons when water-borne diseases are prevalent, ensuring potability.

The community members contributed labour and material amounting to 30% of the total cost. A management committee of the users has been formed, wherein each member contributes Rs.30 a month for the system. All 58 families are benefiting, especially women are happy for reduced drudgery and easy access to clean water.

### **Case Study 3- Kiriti’s Fightback against Malnutrition**

Kriti, a 4-year-old girl from Maandva village in Sarada block, was severely malnourished when the Community Resource Person (CRP) measured her anthropometric data. With a weight of 10.8 kg and a height of 95.6 cm, she was immediately enrolled in a CMAM camp. There, she received Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF), iron tablets, multivitamins, and deworming medicine. After receiving care for several days at home and follow-ups from the CRP, Kriti’s weight increased to 11.9 kg, moving her into the moderately malnourished category. The CRP continued to visit her regularly, counselling parents on including nutrition-rich foods in her diet and following good hygiene practices. With consistent efforts over two months, Kriti showed improvement, reaching a weight of 12.4 kg and falling into the normal category. Both mother and daughter diligently followed the treatment plan, resulting in a successful recovery.

### **Case Study 4- Lalit’s Journey to Education**

Lalit Bhil from Borada Ki Bhagal, faced challenges in his early schooling because his family didn't support education much. Even though Lalit went to school until 5<sup>th</sup> grade, he had to leave after just one week of 6<sup>th</sup> grade because he didn't get enough help. Things changed for Lalit after he joined a Residential Learning Camp (RLC). With support from the instructor and motivating environment, Lalit gained confidence and decided to go back to school post-camp. His story shows how important is for child to have good home and school environment to build interest in education.

### **Case Study 5- Breaking gender barriers – A story of Birothi girls**

In Birothi village, 60 girls regularly engaged in sports and represented the block in football during the Grameen Olympics. They expressed a desire to compete with the boys from

Rohimala, a neighboring village, to enhance their confidence and performance. A friendly match was organized between the girls of Birothi and the boys of Rohimala. The match was held in Birothi village and the girls' team won. The match helped in allowing girls and boys to come together and showcasing girls' abilities and strengthening belief in their potential. 100 community members and the school sports teacher watched the match.

### **Case Study 6- Revitalizing communities through Playgrounds**

The senior secondary school in Ranawada was built on a donated pasture, which was previously encroached by 5 families. The panchayat, with community support, had got the encroachment removed. The school and community wanted to convert 5 bigha of open space of school into a playground and sought Seva Mandir's support. However, 12 families opposed the plan, claiming ownership over the land. After several meetings and land inspections, families vacated the encroachments. Seva Mandir contributed Rs.1.1 lac, and the school and community members contributed Rs.1 lac to develop Kho-Kho and Volleyball grounds.

**Case study 7-** Kagwas village is situated 25 km from Kotra, and has around 300 families primarily occupied in farming and labour. A telecom company began digging lines in farms without prior consent from some families. A family approached Ranaram, President of Village Development Committee and sought help to address the issue. The committee talked with the telecom company's contractor, who claimed to have received permission from the Panchayat. The GVC questioned this decision as those were private lands and took up discussion with the Panchayat.

When no resolution was reached, the Village Development Committee and group members escalated the matter at tehsil, eventually reaching to the Patwari's WhatsApp group. Taking prompt action, the Patwari of Kagwas inspected the site and acknowledged that the lands in question were private. Subsequently, Village Development Committee and Patwari negotiated with the contractor, resulting to an agreement on compensation for damaged crops. After deliberation, Rs.2,500 was provided by the contractor in compensation, of which Rs.2,000 was distributed among 12 affected families, and Rs.500 was deposited in Kagwas Village Development Fund. Through dialogue and collaboration with the administration, the Village Development Committee effectively resolved an issue, highlighting the importance of strong community groups.

Seva Mandir has made significant strides across various sectors.

- Over 1,000 Village development institutions are able to address their conflicts, influencing local level decisions taken in caste Panchayats and elected Panchayats.
- 16,350 hectares of community pastures, forest sites and wastelands restored and developed. Over 63,000 families, 4,00,000 livestock benefited, with over 120 million trees being planted which sequester 3,00,000 tons of carbon (CO<sub>2</sub>) produced annually.
- 1,00,000 farmers benefited through integrated livelihood interventions, thereby increasing agricultural & livestock productivity.
- Early childcare interventions reached out to 1,00,000 children and 70,000 care givers across 1200 villages. Immunization rates have gone up to 60%.
- Over 35,000 people now have access to clean drinking water and sanitation facilities. In total, 17 billion liters of water-harvesting capacity were created through 105 structures.
- There have been transformative changes in the lives of 12,300 women through formation of collectives. 55,000 women benefited through financial and digital literacy.

- Education to over 40,000 out of school children (44% of which are girls) received in over 25 years.
- Motivated local people to perform their duties as teachers, health providers and childcare givers, and to exercise trusteeship over natural resources. The members of villages have demonstrated preference to common good over personal benefits.
- Seva Mandir has been one of the first contacts for many volunteers, scholars and academics interested in rural issues in India. As an institution working directly with rural communities, Seva Mandir has conducted its own research as well as collaborated in research projects to evaluate the issues and gaps at the grass roots and identify solutions that are informed, and evidence based.
- Some research partners are - Massachusetts Institute of Technology, J-PAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab), IFMR (Institute for Financial Management and Research), McGill, Duke, Georgetown, ICRISAT (International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics), LEAD Advocacy Network, and others.

### Learnings

Seva Mandir's key learnings emphasize the importance of community-led governance, effective multi-thematic integration, and adaptability. Successful strategies include leveraging local leadership, diversifying livelihoods, and engaging secondary caregivers in health initiatives. Emphasizing sustainability, integrating education with community ownership, and using sports for youth empowerment have proven effective in achieving long-term impact.

These grassroot leadership development processes in turn became a subtheme in the development process of building up local level cooperation and management groups. It is also interesting to note that the development of this approach actually managed to put into practice the more abstract idea of democracy and cooperation of the mission of Seva Mandir into practice at the grassroot level.

### Success Stories:

Savita Devi, from Naya Khola in Jhadol, has been a beacon of resilience in forest preservation. She rallied with her women's group and successfully tackled wood theft and led a peaceful protest against illegal quarrying by the stone mafia in the forest area. Her leadership extended to advocating for community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, setting a powerful example for neighboring villages and inspiring women to take charge of their environmental conservation.

Manju Meena from Jhabla in Girwa has played a key financial and political influential role in her village. Recognizing the traditional gender roles, she empowered women to achieve financial independence by starting their own businesses. She invested in tents and rents them out to people who travel for their livelihoods, reducing their transportation costs. Her initiatives also include setting up poultry farms and closing a local liquor shop to foster healthier families. By campaigning for a female Sarpanch and fostering women's collective decision-making, she embodies the principle of sangathan mein shakti ("power of unity"), breaking through patriarchal norms and enhancing governance.

Tindori, a village in the dense forests of Jhadol, about 70 km from Udaipur city, faced a relentless struggle with water scarcity. For years, women and children walked over two kilometers barefoot to fetch water, a challenge made even more acute by the COVID-19 lockdown. Seva Mandir's sustainable livelihood project (2019) supported the Village Institution to tackle this issue head-on.

In just four months, 50 villagers united to dig a 35-foot well and build a protective stone wall using traditional bamboo cranes. This collective effort has transformed their lives, ensuring a

reliable water source. As Sarla, a proud Tindori resident, says, "We never thought COVID-19 would help us solve such a huge problem. I do not have to travel so long now; in fact, nearby families can come to our well."

In 2020, a girls' football team from Seva Mandir's Youth programme felt as if they had won the FIFA World Cup as they lifted the runners-up trophy. Just a year before, these girls were living typical rural lives: some worked on farms, some tended to household chores and younger siblings, while a few were fortunate enough to attend school. Most had never heard of football, let alone dreamed of playing it. Seva Mandir's initiative, launched in 2018, transformed their lives. Despite their initial fears and societal challenges, they excelled in the district level-Zinc Football tournament, finishing as runners-up and igniting a newfound confidence to challenge norms and pursue their dreams.

**Instances where the organization's advocacy efforts led to significant policy or societal changes:**

Seva Mandir's advocacy efforts have led to significant policy and societal changes. Federation leaders championed the Amiwaada Satyagraha in 2018, securing bamboo harvest rights for villagers. They also facilitated a successful vaccination drive during the pandemic and mobilized community support to protect common assets.

Additionally, they tackled harmful cultural practices, such as Ghee Paratha, Mrityubhoj, and Band Baajas. The communities' received 296 CFR claims over 38,514 hectares through Van Utthan Sangh's 16 years of dedicated work. The federations have been instrumental in addressing social and governance issues, liaising with government agencies for systemic improvements.

**Other Successes:**

Seva Mandir has garnered numerous accolades over the years, showcasing its impactful work. Notable awards include the NGO Leadership Award from World CSR Day in 2018, the Gandhi Sarvodaya Award for rural development in 2007 and 2010, and the Social Innovation Honours from EdelGive Foundation in 2012. The organization also received the Digital Learning Award in 2006 and the National Biodiversity Award along with the Elinor Ostrom Award in 2023.

The library's career advancement services, which benefit 350 youth annually, and the engagement of 437 volunteers/interns in recent years underscore Seva Mandir's commitment to education and community development. Recognized by global institutions such as Georgetown University and The Brookings Institution, Seva Mandir is celebrated for its innovative and effective approach to addressing development challenges.





## **Background of the Organization**

Growing Association of 19 years from seven to 18 members, Rajmeru emerged as a registered Civil Society Organization (CSO). The name of Rajmeru is the combination of two Hindi words - Raj (Sand) and Meru (Mountain), which reflects its wider spread of work in different geographies and eco-systems. RAJMERU is operational in different locations of Rajasthan and other states of the country; this has successfully expanded its network with CBOs and their collectives who are working in different regions of the country on varied issues and concerns. Rajmeru has the mandate to work on the complex issues of deprivation, livelihood, food security and local Self-Governance. Rajmeru has its registered office in Jaipur, Rajasthan but operational in three other states also like Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Rajmeru, in its long journey of development initiatives expanded its work with different networks and peoples institutions in Rajasthan and other parts of the country. The experience of Rajmeru was helpful in strengthening institutional processes of CBOs and their collectives in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Rajmeru has actively participated in dialogues with different stakeholders in these states for working with 'Action in Collaboration' approach.

Rajmeru has completed a long journey in its development interventions, where this has not only succeeded to build strong CBOs and Peoples Institutions to deliver, and strengthened the bond among CSOs and Community Institutions but simultaneously it has achieved results in the area of livelihood, accessing services, Management of Common Property Resources and Promotion of Sustainable Livelihood.

Rajmeru is working to uplift the most deprived communities, like Tribes, Dalits, Women, DNT, and PVTGs. Rajmeru is dedicated to empowering the society's poor and marginalized people, where they could own development efforts with active participation in planning and decision-making at various levels. Rajmeru is working actively in 21 districts of eastern, western and southern Rajasthan and covering approx. 16500 households directly or indirectly.

**Support Entities:** Bread for the World, Teach India, CTAE and NDDB

## **Profile of Core Members**

Mr. Baburam Bishnoi-Secretary

Ms. Shushila Chouhan-Treasurer

Ms. Manju Meena-President

## **Thematic Engagements**

Rajmeru envisages for a change that improves the quality of life of poor and marginalized People who are socially and economically weaker with powerlessness due to lack of information, awareness and access to resources. Rajmeru believes that the empowerment of these people could bring this change with Collective Action and Collaboration around the following issues:

- Livelihood and Food Security
- Natural Resource Management
- Health and Education
- Gender Mainstreaming
- DRR and Climate Change
- Strengthening Institutional Governance

## **Milestones**

### **Livelihood and Food Security:**

- The establishment of 07 sustainable livelihood models have also strengthened the livelihoods of members associated with POs.
- Rajmeru promoted organic farming by promoting organic manure and organic fertilizers.

### **Natural Resource Management:**

- Good practices for commons (Natural Resources) have been taken in place by POs. They have worked collectively to remove encroachment and develop common paths, common land, and such infrastructure like drinking water tank.

### **Gender Mainstreaming :**

- Women leaders know the proper process for their collectives and needs. Now, they have developed applications and resolutions to submit to the formal local institution- Gram Panchayat, and are following up on their applications for action.
- The women's own campaign 'Sang Chalo Ri' has also become active in raising women related issues.

### **DRR and Climate Change:**

As the impact of various demonstrations under the Sustainable Agriculture Development Program, the interest of farmers is increasing towards organic farming and the interest of people towards smart agriculture is increasing.

Rajmeru organized a campaign “Plantation Drive Campaign in Action and Collaboration” in July and August 2024. The main objectives of this campaign were to plant trees to conserve the

environment, to aware the community about the importance of plants, and try to reduce the adverse effects of climate change by creating carbon sinks through plantations. Under this campaign, a total of **37969 plants were planted in 135 villages in 81 panchayats in 18 districts of Rajasthan** with the help of local people's organizations and volunteers.

#### **Strengthening Institutional Governance:**

- POs members in the southern region have worked on Forest Rights issues and got pattas under IFRA and CFRA. They visited to meet officials at block and district Level on their own expenses and were well aware of the act before this visit and the steps to be followed by them.
- 30 POs have started to develop their action plan with a participatory approach in common meetings and work accordingly.
- To create a stable, self-reliant, and self-governed model of People Organization, a strong base of community mobilization and a self-motivated leadership model must be prepared.
- Youth and women leadership has emerged strongly, where they have been vocal in raising their issues of concern at various levels.

### **Specialization and Unique Characteristics**

Rajmeru works on enhancing the knowledge management of the community and their leadership, building capacities of youth leaders for their active involvement in the community development processes, and strengthening of people's institutions. Rajmeru intervened meaningfully at the grassroots level, to build local leadership, promote women's participation and decision-making for their empowerment, and promote collective action and collaborations at various levels.

### **Organizational Impact**

Impact of Collective Action is visible on the POs and the lives of targeted group, where they are benefitted by land Pattas under IFRA, and CFRA. Further, they have been able to access PDS, old age persons etc. Our Key leaders take active participation during the campaigning process and its impact is visible in the level of awareness about their entitlements and the role of their Institution.

- POs members in southern region have worked on Forest Right issues and got pattas/land ownership under IFRA and CFRA. They visited to meet officials at block and district Level on their own expenses and were well aware of the act before this visit and the steps to be followed by them.
- POs. have taken good practices for commons (Natural Resources) in place. They have worked collectively for removing encroachment and develop common paths, common land and such infrastructure like drinking water tank.
- Women leaders know the proper process for their collectives and needs. Now, they have developed applications and resolutions to submit to the formal local institution- Gram Panchayat and following up on their applications for action.
- POs have started to develop their action plan with a participatory approach in common meetings and work accordingly.



- Coordination hub mechanism promotes a participatory approach to identify issues, discussions, suggestions, and decision-making processes that are in proper practice at different levels.

1. 30 POs are active in 21 districts of Rajasthan
2. 278 Key Leaders (136 Women Leaders)
3. 63 Youth Leaders from 30 POs
4. 07 Sustainable Livelihood Models (Vermi Composting, Horticulture, Fruits and Vegetable Farming, Honey bee keeping, Biogas, Organic manure and seed kiosk, Spices and Snacks preparations)

## **Learnings**

### **Lessons learned**

- Individual benefits mobilize the community for collective action and commitment to PO. The small and instant benefit will create a bonding between members and their collectives (PO).
- Community Participation during the process of execution of activities improves the quality of activity.
- Women & youth's active participation in collective action is more effective than only men's participation.
- Clear & proper Communication at various levels
- Collective action develops ownership at various levels
- Documentation at various levels is essential to increase the visibility of work done.
- Individual benefits mobilize the community for collective action and commitment to PO.
- The small and instant benefit will create a bonding between members and their collectives (PO).

## **Challenges**

- ▶ In the initial phase, we find it hard to mobilize the community to restructure their old VDCs and rejuvenate their POs. We have involved the Chief functionary to expedite the process and it has helped us in the mobilization process. The community starts to realize the importance of PO with their experiences. Once they are accepted then active participation is increased and this becomes helpful to implement the objective of the project.

- ▶ Formation of VDC/CBOS requires more democratic process and representation of women, most vulnerable and youths. Focused targeted families are from marginalized sections of the communities but some places, there are high influences persons express to play role for personal benefits.
- ▶ In the beginning of the year, PO members raised a demand for daily expenses for PO, towards linkages and liaison at block, district Levels, gradually throughout the various meetings, they understood the need for PO, working for their community and they have to borne the part of such expenses.
- ▶ The meaning of Sustainable model Activity was understood as per the different understandings within POs. RAJMERU has organized discussion sessions frequently for socially, economically and environment-friendly models that support needy families, now an understanding has been built, and such models like vermicomposting units, and biogas units have been planned and worked out.
- ▶ Empowering women to make a voice and demand for their issues was the most challenging task and the Secretariat team has started thought and process for Women Gram Sabha was strengthen, ground level preparedness was made with them and they were started to solve their issues.
- ▶ After training on Youth leadership modules, some of the youth migrated, it was the biggest challenge and team has made enough efforts with POs to continue work with these youths.

### **Success Stories**

#### **“A Progressive Farmer – Prabhu Lal Biarwa”**



Nowadays, most of the farmers are using chemical fertilizers and medicines in the greed of more production, due to which agricultural production has started becoming poisonous. It is adversely affecting people's health and lands are also becoming barren.

Prabhu Lal Bairwa does animal husbandry. Earlier, they used to heap animal dung and put it in the field after a year, but it gave less profit than vermi compost. Now they collect animal dung and dry it near the fields. Later, the cow dung is wetted with water and placed in a cement pond and earthworms are left in it. Earthworms eat cow dung and vermicompost is prepared from their waste.

Prabhu Lal Bairwa also cultivated onion. In which no chemical fertilizers or medicines were used. The use of vermicompost resulted in very good yields. Prabhu Lal said that “Earlier my land was hard, after using this vermi compost, the land has become fertile.

He said that “If production is on natural cow dung manure and vermicompost, they last us throughout the year and the products have very good taste. He also cultivating black wheat which have more nutrients than normal wheat.

Earlier he was using chemical fertilizers in his fields. After getting training from Rajmeru organization and support in making vermicompost, he became aware and started doing organic farming. Now Prabhu Lal is doing organic farming. He has planted tomato, chilli, brinjal, ladyfinger, guar and fennel.

### **A Progressive Farmer - Kalu Lal Meena**



Farmer Kalu Lal Meena, a resident of Partapur block of Salumber district, doing vegetable farming in half bigha of land. Earlier, he used to use chemical fertilizers and manure in his field. Earlier he did not grow vegetables. He used to buy vegetables from the market for household consumption. Due to this, the health of the family started deteriorating day by day. During a meeting organized by Rajmeru Sanstha, he got information about organic farming. Kalu Lal expressed his interest in organic farming.

Rajmeru Sanstha explained the importance of organic farming to the farmers and also made efforts to enhance the sustainable livelihood of farmers. Rajmeru organization not only inspired people to do organic farming by providing seeds but also told them the methods of farming to increase the yield.

After getting technical training and vegetable seeds, Kalu Lal sowed all the seeds in his field and used organic fertilizer and manure.

With the hard work of Kalu Lal and the support of Rajmeru, Kalu Lal got a bumper yield of tomatoes in one season and earned an income of about 45 thousand rupees.

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## **Journey of UNNATI**

UNNATI started its Rajasthan initiative in 1997, from Jodhpur office. Geographically the primary focus was on Western Rajasthan, covering districts of Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Nagour and Pali. Western Rajasthan's physiography is dominated by the vast Thar Desert, one of the World's largest arid zones, characterised by sweeping sand dunes, gravel plains and rocky outcrops. The region's landscape is dotted with sparse vegetation and thorny bushes adapted to extreme temperatures and low rainfall. The economy is primarily agrarian, relying on animal husbandry and handicrafts, with limited industrial opportunities. Educational facilities and healthcare were sparse, especially in rural areas, with limited access to formal schooling and essential medical services. Infrastructure, such as roads and electricity, was slowly expanding, connecting remote areas to towns, facilitating access to resources, and beginning to reshape the social landscape of this historically isolated region.

At that time, handful of NGOs were active in the region. One of the prominent organizations was the URMUL Trust, founded by Shri Sanjay Ghosh. Around the same period, URMUL began its decentralization efforts. Other notable NGOs included the Society to Uplift Rural Economy (SURE) in Barmer, Gram Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS) in Jodhpur, and Mahila Mandal in Barmer.

UNNATI's journey in Rajasthan can be broadly divided into two phases:

- A. From 1997 to 2010: UNNATI functioned primarily as a support organization. In its early years, it focused on capacity building of grassroot NGOs before transitioning into a strategic partner role, working closely with NGOs on specific sector or thematic area.
- B. From 2011 to the present: UNNATI has shifted to serve as a direct field implementation agency, actively engaging in field-based projects. However, sectoral role of support organisation is still continued to an extent.

The transition from a support organisation to field-based organisation, however, was gradual and non-linear, unfolding over several years. Throughout this period, UNNATI's programmatic scale, geographic coverage, issues of focus and collaborating institutions underwent changes. The organization adapted its strategies and programs in response to emerging community needs, shifting socio-economic conditions, and the evolving landscape of local governance and social development.

This dynamic approach allowed UNNATI to remain relevant and effective in addressing the diverse challenges faced by the communities it served, fostering resilience and empowering local organizations through tailored interventions and partnerships. Larger focus on vulnerable centrality, collaborative approach, participatory methods and broader governance framework remained the same over these years, which can be seen in all its programs and interventions.

## **AS A SUPPORT ORGANISATION (1997-2010)**

During the initial period UNNATI focussed on two strategic area (1) Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions so that they become effective and accountable, and (2) Support to Local Institution (NGOs) focussing on human rights and livelihood issues. Though there was convergence between two thematic areas, they had separate trajectory in terms of how they evolved, geographical coverage and consolidation. Since 2001-02, work related to disaster (primarily drought) started, initially relief work, but it was mainstreamed during the years of 2002-2005 and since 2006 it became significant in overall operations and work on Disaster Risk Reduction became third thematic area.

These were pre-social media era and use of internet and access to various information resources was still not democratised. Another hallmark of UNNATI's work during the period was the quality of field-based research and knowledge product it used to develop on social development issues and processes. Those educational material was used by community members, NGOs and other civil society institutions to learn and use it for their intervention.

### **Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions and promotion of Social Accountability**

In the context of the 72nd and 73rd Constitutional Amendments, which advanced local self-governance, UNNATI was a pioneer in recognizing the importance of strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural areas and municipalities in urban areas as essential for social development and vulnerability reduction. UNNATI's work in this area can be divided into three phases:

#### **Phase I: 1997-2001 (Initiation of PRC and Governance Framework in Social Development Sector in Western Rajasthan)**

The primary focus was to build the capacities of elected representatives, particularly women, to empower them within local self-governance structures. While the 72nd and 73rd Amendments provided opportunities for election and leadership, many individuals—especially those from marginalized groups—required support to understand the complexities of local governance, develop a social development perspective, and enhance their ability to manage their roles effectively.

Additionally, these representatives needed the backing of the broader community to navigate local power dynamics and effectively plan and implement development programs. UNNATI's efforts aimed to bridge these gaps, ensuring inclusive and responsive governance at the grassroots level.

To achieve this, UNNATI developed the “Panchayat Resource Centre” (PRC) model—a block-level platform designed for capacity building of elected representatives and information dissemination to the broader community. Each PRC was typically staffed by a two-person team (one male and one female) who conducted regular field visits to support women representatives, identify local development issues, and assist Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in addressing them.

The PRCs also facilitated gram sabha mobilization, organized Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaigns (PEWAC), disseminated information on government schemes, provisions, and laws, and offered structured training, exposure visits, and field interactions to strengthen the capacities of women representatives. Strategically located in or near Block Panchayats, PRCs became central to fostering grassroots governance and empowering communities.

Between 1997 and 2001, UNNATI established two Panchayat Resource Centers (PRCs): one in Mandore, Jodhpur, and another in Pugal, Bikaner, in partnership with Shanti Maitri Mission. Concurrently, UNNATI worked to orient NGOs toward governance issues, encouraging them to incorporate governance frameworks into their development initiatives. A series of training sessions was organized for senior NGO team members to build their capacity in this area. In addition, an extensive Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaign (PEWAC) was conducted across Western Rajasthan, reaching approximately 50 blocks in the Jodhpur, Barmer, Nagaur, Bikaner, and Pali districts, enhancing community awareness and participation in local governance.

During this phase, the PRC model was introduced in Western Rajasthan, laying the foundation for increased engagement with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the region. Concurrently, local NGOs developed a stronger understanding of the role and importance of PRIs in the social development sector. As a result, many NGOs began to integrate PRIs as critical stakeholders in their development processes, fostering a collaborative approach to community empowerment and local governance.

#### Phase II: 2001-2004 (Promotion of PRC at state level)

In the second phase, the PRC model was expanded to five blocks across different regions of Rajasthan. This scaling aimed to popularize the model, test its effectiveness in varied contexts, and develop a robust approach to make PRI strengthening a core agenda for stakeholders at the state level. These five PRCs continued to focus on building the capacities of elected women representatives, with some work also extending to urban clusters.

Phase II leveraged the insights gained in Western Rajasthan, extending these learnings statewide by establishing PRCs in diverse regions and orienting civil society organizations toward governance frameworks. In effect, the impact of the Western Rajasthan model was successfully replicated across Rajasthan, creating a more unified approach to local governance empowerment.

#### Phase III: 2004-2010 (Consolidation of PRC in Western Rajasthan and creation of field based models for social development initiative in governance framework)

Between 2004 and 2010, the PRC model was further consolidated by establishing field-based models for social development work. During this period, five PRCs operated in various blocks of Western Rajasthan, directly managed by UNNATI. There was a strong emphasis on building the capacities of women elected representatives through the development of informal associations among PRI members, alongside efforts to address pressing development issues. For instance, in the Balesor block Panchayat of Jodhpur district, intensive initiatives were implemented to improve water access through the engagement of PRI representatives.

Additionally, efforts in urban areas were intensified, particularly in Jodhpur city, where an Urban Resource Centre was established in alignment with the PRC model. UNNATI continued to support local NGOs in integrating governance frameworks into their development initiatives, ensuring a comprehensive approach to community empowerment and effective governance across both rural and urban contexts.

Support to local institutions focussing on human rights and livelihood issues.

The phase of 1997 to 2010 can be broadly divided in two phases.

#### Phase 1 (1997-2000) Work as purely capacity building institution

In this phase, the focus was on supporting individuals and newly registered organizations in enhancing their capacity, perspective, and linkages as they promoted their NGOs. A core

component of this support involved training senior team members on critical aspects such as social development perspectives, participatory planning and monitoring, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), results-based management, and financial management. Additionally, a small fellowship program called Management in Development (MIND) was offered to selected NGOs to help kickstart their initiatives.

Another key aspect of support was facilitating linkages with funding organizations, support institutions, and technical agencies. UNNATI also provided assistance in developing and strengthening various institutional, financial, and governance systems, ensuring adherence to statutory provisions. This comprehensive approach aimed to empower NGOs and enhance their effectiveness in serving their communities.

The NGOs were also supported in identifying key social development issues. Some organizations had a strong commitment to specific social issues but required assistance in pinpointing entry points, developing programmatic strategies, and establishing linkages with similar institutions.

Many of these organizations focused on human rights issues—such as women’s empowerment, Dalit organizing, the challenges faced by nomadic communities, and the concerns of Pakistani refugees who migrated to India due to religious persecution—as well as livelihood initiatives encompassing both on-farm and non-farm income generation, health, and education.

During this period, a total of approximately 40 NGOs, primarily in Western Rajasthan, received support. These organizations-initiated development work in their respective regions, enhancing their individual capacities. Additionally, an informal network of NGOs emerged, fostering collaboration and sharing of knowledge on similar intervention issues and geographical challenges.

## Phase II (2000-2010) Work as a Strategic Partner

In the initial phase (1997-2001), UNNATI operated primarily as a capacity-building institution. However, as NGOs began to grow and engage in issue-based social development work, it became evident that while generic support was beneficial initially, more targeted assistance was needed as their needs evolved. To effectively support NGOs on specific aspects of their work, UNNATI recognized the importance of developing niche areas and building capacities around them.

This realization led UNNATI to adopt the role of a strategic partner, collaborating with individual NGOs or groups of NGOs on particular issues, each with a defined role. This shift required greater involvement at the field level and a deeper sector-specific understanding to effectively address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by these organizations.

One such initiative involved facilitating the process of granting citizenship to Pakistani oustees who migrated to India during the 1971 war and afterward due to religious persecution. This work was carried out in collaboration with a dedicated NGO and community groups representing the Pakistani oustees.

Another important initiative focused on Dalit organizing, which began with small partner support for capacity building. Over time, this effort evolved into the Dalit Rights Campaign in Western Rajasthan, where UNNATI played a specific and strategic role in advocating for the rights and empowerment of Dalit communities.

## **DALIT RIGHTS CAMPAIGN in Western Rajasthan**

The Dalit Rights Campaign was launched in 1998 with four small Dalit-led partner NGOs in the Jodhpur and Barmer districts. Its overarching objective was to combat the age-old practices of untouchability within the Dalit community through leadership development and community action. Initially, the campaign focused on addressing social reform issues, such as the use of opium in social gatherings, expenses related to post-death rituals (referred to as *Mrityu Bhoj*), and child marriage. Simultaneously, efforts were made to connect impoverished Dalit households with various government programs and schemes, such as pension plans and the Indira Awas Yojna.

Following the focus on social reforms, the Campaign shifted to tackle issues related to physical discrimination and untouchability in state-run institutions, including schools, Panchayat buildings, and public health centers, as well as community spaces like water resources in drought-prone Western Rajasthan.

The approach involved engaging with these institutions to cease discriminatory practices or prepare for legal action. Despite facing violence and retaliation from caste groups on several occasions, the initiative was largely successful, addressing around 2,000 cases related to primary schools, Panchayat buildings, and water resources. This success bolstered the confidence of Dalit community leaders and organizations to assert their rights.

The campaign's achievements in combating untouchability paved the way for further work addressing violence against Dalits. However, this legal and social struggle proved to be more challenging, as it involved lengthy, expensive legal processes and high stakes. Approximately 1,000 cases of atrocities, particularly against women, were taken up, along with issues related to land encroachments, with around 500 cases concerning 7,000 bighas of land addressed. In one notable case in Bhilo Ki Dhani of the Sivana block in Barmer district, the campaign successfully resolved a land dispute involving 500 bighas affecting around 25 Dalit households.

Community organizing and leadership development were foundational pillars of the Dalit Rights Campaign, creating a robust platform for Dalits to identify and address issues affecting their lives and livelihoods. A block-level platform, known as the Dalit Resource Centre, was established to facilitate organizing and capacity-building initiatives.

Community leaders were trained with a holistic development perspective, understanding the broader marginalization processes, legal literacy concerning various acts and legal procedures, and community mobilization skills. During this period, approximately 250-300 leaders were developed.

Although institutional financial support for the Dalit Rights Campaign concluded around 2010, the awareness and community development efforts initiated by the campaign continue to empower community leaders to address issues even today.



## INITIATIVE ON DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

The initial focus of UNNATI's disaster risk reduction efforts was primarily on developing individual and community water harvesting structures to enhance access to drinking water. Following the devastating floods in Barmer in 2005, rehabilitation support was also provided, particularly in the area of housing. Between 2006 and 2010, the coverage and scope of work expanded significantly, with major efforts concentrated on the following areas:

1. Promotion of Water Harvesting Capacities: Enhancing both individual and community-level water harvesting techniques.
2. Introduction of Horticulture: Encouraging the cultivation of fruit and nut trees to diversify income sources and improve food security.
3. Ensuring Health Insurance: Facilitating access to health insurance for vulnerable communities to safeguard against medical expenses.
4. Demonstration and Dissemination of Disaster-Resilient Housing Structures: Promoting construction methods that can withstand disasters, thereby enhancing community resilience.
5. Strengthening Community Access to Government Schemes: Facilitating access to programs like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to help communities effectively respond to disasters.

These initiatives aimed to build community resilience, improve livelihoods, and ensure better preparedness for future disasters

Since 2003-04, UNNATI has expanded its focus to include disaster risk reduction, particularly concerning drought. This initiative has been a significant area of work carried out through strategic partnerships with grassroots NGOs. Notably, the disaster risk reduction efforts were implemented in the same regions as the Dalit Rights Campaign, allowing for effective convergence of both initiatives.

By integrating these efforts, UNNATI aimed to enhance community resilience while addressing both social justice and disaster preparedness, ultimately benefiting the communities served by both campaigns.

It needs to be mentioned that the generic capacity building support was also continued through training and field level action. However, the major focus was to work as strategic partner.





### **Background of the Organisation**

In the recent decades, seasonal, circular migration from rural areas to the more prosperous urban centres has emerged as a critical livelihood strategy for millions of rural poor in India. The 2016-17 Economic Survey estimates that the magnitude of this movement is to the tune of 139 million, comprising about 29% of India's total workforce. States such as UP, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, with laggard economies and a surplus of labor, are the primary suppliers of human resources. Despite the compelling numbers that underlie this phenomenon, the policies of the Indian state have not been effective in providing any form of legal or social protection to this vulnerable population.

Aajeevika Bureau was established in 2005, in response to a shifting livelihood landscape and the growing incidence of seasonal and circular migration from southern Rajasthan - an area of chronic poverty concentration- from 2 where migration for wage labour is highly pervasive. Indiscriminate mining, climate change and the consequent depletion of resources are some of the primary reasons contributing to distress in the region. AB's work is largely with migrant workers from Adivasi communities (Bhil, Garasiya and Meena tribes), and a comparatively smaller share of Scheduled Caste (SC) and OBC households (less than 10%) in the region who rely on migration to combat this distress. Given the caste-based segmentation of labour markets in Indian cities it is evident that these very communities are also largely concentrated in sectors that are highly exploitative and unsafe. Thus, a holistic response to this distress that accounts for the workers' vulnerabilities at the source and destinations is at the heart of AB's strategy.

At the source end, the organization's work spans over 7 districts in south Rajasthan, from where workers (predominantly men; but increasingly families as well) migrate to seek employment in the informal economy of cities in Western India. At the destination end, AB works in the states of Gujarat (Ahmedabad, Surat and Ankleshwar), Maharashtra (Mumbai and Pune), Karnataka (Bangalore) as well as selected industrial hubs within Rajasthan (Jodhpur and Ballotra).

On a smaller scale (three locations - Kushalgarh, Salumbar and Sabla blocks of Banswara, Salumbar and Dungarpur district, respectively), AB also works with a segment of adolescent girls (approximately 600 in number) who are increasingly being engaged in precarious settings in the local labour markets or are migrating with their families for work.

Through an integrated approach, AB seeks to serve this vulnerable migrant workforce such that they are able to access their rights and improve their security and stability both in their labour markets as well as their rural homes. The organization aims to bring about a sustainable change in work conditions and public provisioning systems for labour migrants, to ultimately ensure that migrant and informal workers can live and work with dignity everywhere.

### **Profile of Core Members**

Headquartered in Udaipur, the non-profit public service organization was founded by Mr. Rajiv Khandelwal and Mr. Krishnavatar Sharma in 2005. Mr. Rajiv oversees the organization's strategies, programmes, liaison, fundraising and capacity-building functions. Over the course of his 30-year career, he has held leadership roles in a range of non-profit organizations, implementing programmes, conducting research and providing advice and guidance to NGOs, donors and the government in Rajasthan. Mr. Krishnavatar holds a background in law and brings decades of experience of developing programmes and leading field teams in AB. He has a deep understanding of community institutions and has been on the forefront of nurturing leadership in organizations of informal sector workers. He also served as the Program Director of AB for 20 years and has been succeeded by Mr. Rajendra Sharma. Mr. Rajendra has been with AB since 2009 and has rich experience in collectivization of workers, legal aid, social protection, occupational safety and advocacy for informal workers and their communities. His contributions have been pivotal in establishing and shaping some of the most influential workers' collectives fostered by AB.

AB's organizational governance structure is composed of a management group (Executive Director and Programme Directors) and an operations group (made up of Programme Managers - regional coordinators and thematic leads; and centre in-charges). The organization's field staff is composed of Executives, Senior Associates and Fellows. More information about AB's teams can be found on its [website](#).

### **Thematic Engagements**

Interventions deployed by AB include - legal aid and worker education; skill training and placement services; collectivization of women from migration-dependent households; facilitating access to government entitlements; promotion of workers' visibility and power through collectivization; research and evidence-based advocacy. These interventions are delivered through a network of field-based Worker Facilitation Centres that are located within urban industrial clusters and rural locations with heavy out-migration.

A key operational strategy that runs as a common thread across the wide spectrum of interventions and thematic spaces that AB engages in is that of nurturing and leveraging community institutions such as worker collectives and women's solidarity groups and federations. Unions and worker collectives nurtured by AB (8 at present) have a collective strength of over 35,000 members. Between 20-30 percent of this group is composed of women workers. Women's Solidarity groups also known as Ujala Samoohs have been nurtured by the Family Empowerment Programme (FEP), which work to mobilize and empower women from migration dependent families and have over 15,000 members across 3 districts. In addition to these groups, in Banswara district, where the work is exclusively with women migrants, the program has had consistent engagement with over 4000 women who have formed a Women

Workers' Collective. Led by a cadre of peer leaders who are mentored and trained by AB's staff, these community institutions act as platforms that allow people to come together, articulate their needs and challenges, and drive collective action around common causes. At the destination end, AB has established dedicated resource centres, called Mahila Shramik Shakti Kendras (MSSK). Similar to WFCs, these MSSKs serve as specific sites for the mobilization of women workers and facilitation of linkages to legal aid, public institutions and basic entitlements.

Reinforcing the rights of women as citizens and workers both at the source and destination locations lies at the core of the FEP Program. Building a response to violence that women workers face at the source and destinations has been one of the key elements of the program. Herein, the Collectives nurtured by the program have not only formed their own governing bodies to advocate for women's cases, but also ensure that such cases are heard within existing formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms.

AB's Skill Training, Employability and Placement (STEP) Academy is a unique learning institution dedicated to building technical and life skill competencies among rural youth. STEP Academy reaches youth who are at the threshold of starting work or have entered labour markets in low waged, hazardous work. In more recent years, STEP has also made concerted efforts towards increasing its outreach to young women, designing and hosting a variety of trainings that promote non-traditional livelihoods. It has played a vital role in improving wages, business incomes and job security for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Each year, informal workers in India collectively lose billions of rupees because of wage fraud and suffer injuries and accidents that remain uncompensated by contractors, employers, or the state. Recruited through a chain of intermediaries and employed without formal contracts, the lack of evidence and records makes it nearly impossible for workers to assert their claims in a court of law. The Legal Education and Aid (LEAD) Cell was conceptualised as a powerful, scalable model for addressing these problems and empowering workers to access justice in their recurring experiences of abuse, exploitation and malpractice. AB also operates the Labour Line (1800-1800-999), a phone-based helpline offering legal aid, mediation, and information. India Labour Line (ILL) (1800-833-9020) has been set up as a scaled-up version of Aajeevika's helpline based legal aid model. With administrative headquarters in Mumbai, Gurgaon and Bangalore, ILL is currently operational in 13 cities across 9 states.

In addition to designing and implementing such multi-dimensional programs, AB has also been instrumental in incubating an array of independent organisations in the region. These organisations work to uncover and address very particular challenges faced by migrant workers and their families which potentially heighten the ongoing distress.

[Basic Healthcare Services \(BHS\)](#) is an organization of immense repute focusing on high-quality, low-cost primary healthcare services in rural areas affected by poverty, poor access and distress migration. Tribal communities in remote, rural areas of south Rajasthan carry a high burden of illness and malnutrition. In response to these conditions, BHS runs AMRIT Clinics that provide easy access to primary health care to an otherwise unserved population of over one lakh. BHS also supports day-care centres for children under 5 (Phulwaris) in remote hamlets,

that ensure proper nutrition and adequate care for children whose parents are deprived of these resources.

[Shram Sarathi](#) (SS) is a pioneering non-profit financial services company that aims to expand financial inclusion of labour migrants and their households. The first dedicated financial services institution in the country for migrants, Shram Sarathi offers services specially designed for low-income migrants and their households. These include affordable credit such as small loans, savings, insurance, old-age pensions, remittances and payments and a significant financial literacy program.

ShelterSquare Foundation (SSF) is a multi-stakeholder platform to develop and implement housing solutions for migrant workers. Across destination cities, migrant workers are denied dignified housing. In the absence of affordable housing solutions, workers resort to precarious living arrangements, with poor access to basic amenities and constant threat of eviction. The gendered costs of such living arrangements are high too, given the grave safety risks for women workers. SSF started its first hostel and mess operations in the city of Surat in 2023 and is now ready to expand to other migrant-dense cities of Gujarat.

[Work Fair and Free Foundation](#) (WFF) is a knowledge institution that was earlier housed within AB as the erstwhile Centre for Migration and Labour Solutions. WFF aims to bring together grounded and rigorous research, insightful policy work, and innovative teaching and training, all supported and informed by impactful practice in urban industrial centres as well as rural migration clusters. The organization is driven by a commitment to advance worker-centric knowledge and action, so that informal labour migration can become more secure and dignified.

### **Specialization and Unique Characteristics**

AB adopts a holistic and intersectional approach to tackle the negative impact of migration. At the outset, one of the novel aspects of the organization's work includes offering services and collectivization support at the source and destination ends along the Western migration corridor. Bridging the gaps between the source and the destinations was crucial to the organization given that the migrant unfriendly and insensitive nature of government and private bodies at both ends often result in exclusions of migrant workers from important institutions and policies.

The expanse of AB's activities across both ends has also meant that, over the last two decades, each of the thematic programs have adapted themselves to cater to more industries that employ migrant workers. In Surat, AB's work is premised around the construction industry and the power looms. In Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, other than the industries, AB's teams also work with smaller manufacturing units, domestic workers and security guards. With this, not only has the organization's reach expanded through interactions with communities across India, but each of the programs' foundations have also been strengthened.

Another key aspect of AB's work is that collectivization is imagined as the primary tool for change. As mentioned, the WFCs and MSSKs serve as spaces for rest, planning and collective action for migrant workers. For informal workers with no established employers or social

security, the Collectives hold the local and State Govts. accountable to address the issues of migrant workers and their households at the source. At the source and destination, the Collectives act as powerful pressure groups against both employers and the State, demanding safe workplaces, just working conditions and decent living conditions. The Collectives at the source remain at the forefront of organizing Jan Sunwaais or Public Hearings, inviting local leaders to share their manifestos and directly engage with the community as it holds them accountable to their promises. The leaders within these Collectives have also been encouraged to participate in electoral politics and assume powerful positions that could bring change within their communities.

After two decades, each of AB's interventions continue to remain community driven. This means that not only is the community at the centre of these activities, but it also actively raises demands that certain interventions are implemented in the region. An example is how the adolescent girls and women workers have demanded that the existing operations also cater towards building allyship among adolescent boys and men.

Another unique feature about the designed interventions is its reliance on research. Members of the AB team are periodically involved with conducting small surveys in their regions with an aim to deepen their understanding. This helps the team revisit, reflect and identify newer groups or challenge areas to address. These studies or surveys are designed and conducted with the help of the Collective leaders who provide deeper insights into the workings of and shifts within the community. In the past, AB has undertaken some studies on a larger scale. Some of these include understanding the patterns of outmigration from Rajasthan and Odisha and looking at migrant workers' access to amenities in the urban. These have been readily used and cited within academia and by civil society organisations. These findings have also helped AB in its advocacy efforts to improve migrant workers' access to facilities with the respective labour and welfare departments in both source and destinations,

### **Organisational Impact**

As a result of placing collectivization at the centre of its work, AB has been able to build strong community institutions such as Ujala Samoohs (Women's Collectives at source) and Workers' Unions (across source and destinations). The Women's Collectives at source serve as important platforms to cement the identities of women as workers and citizens in the eyes of the State, community and labour markets. Nurturing this group has been especially important in a context where praxis and research tend to frame women as those who are 'left behind' dependents of the male outmigrants. The leaders emerging from these groups continue to constantly challenge the discriminatory norms in their households and beyond to hold positions of power. The groups and the leaders have become the trusted first responders for the community.

Over the last two decades, AB has been working consistently to draw attention to and place the issues of migrant workers at the centre of policy making, research and action. This is an especially important achievement in a landscape where the labour departments remained apathetic to the rights of migrant workers and greater discourse on the subject has only emerged in the light of Covid-19. At the time, AB's work was called upon at multiple Government and Civil Society platforms given its expertise on the subject. In its first decade, the co-founders of AB won the prestigious Indian Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award (2010) for the

organization's pioneering work. The organization continues to garner a lot of respect for its work in such spaces.

A major victory for AB in its advocacy efforts was working with various migrant-dense city administrations to implement the WFC model to support workers. These recommendations were actively taken up by the administrations in Gujarat and Odisha. Similar recommendations have also been accepted by our industry partners under the jointly formed Social Compact program in industrial hubs in Maharashtra. In Kerala, AB worked with the Government to ensure greater inclusion of migrant workers' children in local schools.

In addition to its intensive research and knowledge generation work, AB worked closely with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to develop a policy framework for the inclusion of migrant workers in 2020. The report discussed the patterns of internal migration, the challenges faced by migrant workers and prescribed the way forward for effective action from sending and receiving States in India.

### Learnings

Over the years, despite having built an intersectional approach to tackle the challenges posed by migration, the need to address deeper issues at the source arise. These include matters such as land disputes, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, caste patriarchy to name a few.

The FEP program and the Collectives have risen to the challenge of building a sustained response to these issues. It has become imperative to understand the deep intersections of these varied, yet day-to-day issues with workers' lives – how these issues contribute to the ongoing distress in the region, how these interact with labour market outcomes for workers and their impact on access to local governance.

Given the nature of settlements at destinations, women workers are vulnerable to sexual violence at the hands of their employer, colleagues, spouse, neighbours and sometimes even passers-by in open living spaces. Any organization working with migrant women cannot miss out the deep intersections of violence with work. Violence manifests in different forms throughout the woman workers' migration journey. Here, adolescent girls are doubly vulnerable owing to their age.

AB's teams find that women return to the source to address such issues and often find the institutions at the destinations extremely inaccessible. It is here that the links between the source and the destination that AB sought to create must be used effectively to establish spaces that migrant workers, especially women and even adolescents can access. This means not only creating such spaces through the WFCs or MSSKs, but also strengthening the existing machinery of the State. This is also relevant for women at source who face grave situations in their homes, the streets and the workplaces.

Understanding the changes in the labour market and looking at newer worker groups has been another learning for the organization. Looking at the gig economy and participating in forums centred around different worker groups have been some of the smaller shifts in AB's and its partner organisations' work. The organization has also engaged in studies that look at newer

challenges posed by Climate Change and Automation to migrant workers' work and lives. Through these shifts, the importance of building the capacities of the team has also been one of AB's learnings. Over the last year, the organization has been designing and conducting regular workshops for its field teams.

**Future Directions**

In the coming years, the organization plans to widen its reach across more source and destination locations. Here, expanding operations to migration dependent areas in Central India remains high on AB's priority. The existing Collectives also plan to expand their reach to bring in more workers from similar occupations residing in States bordering South Rajasthan. This would mean that the linkages between the source and destinations would be further strengthened. Building regional networks with similar unions and Collectives in such regions would be the Collective's first few tasks.

AB also aims to deepen its work on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH). Increasingly, OSH as a subject domain has become central to AB's research work and Collectivization activities.

AB has been working with industries to offer model worksite options accounting for workers' health and security requirements. Supporting industries with setting up these options and monitoring them continuously would be one of AB's key tasks in the coming years. Additionally, through the Social Compact platform AB will continue to advocate for improved OSH outcomes within partner companies and their supply chains.

Forming deeper partnerships with the Government towards the effective implementation of labour laws and ensuring active appointments at various designations within the labour departments would be another priority area for AB.





## A Successful Story of Aastha Among People

### 1. Historical Background

In 1986, a few social activists with a shared vision laid down the foundation of *Aastha*. The ideology of *Aastha* is that the poor and marginalized can deeply understand their situations and to transform them independently. "*Aastha believes in the inherent power of people,*" which often remains untapped due to a lack of knowledge, awareness, and collective effort. *Aastha* believes that analysing people's situations along with them, organizing collective actions, and initiating issue-based processes lead to change. Through their collective and organized efforts, people can rise above helplessness and apathy to take control of their livelihood resources.

Looking at the outcomes of development achieved so far, *Aastha* collaborates with people to create a new definition of development, with the process of sustainable and balanced growth as its foundation. The envisioned society is built on new social values and alternative development perspectives. For *Aastha*, the measure of development begins with initiating change at the local level and progresses to systemic levels, impacting both broad and intricate frameworks.

### 1.2. Fundamental Principles

*Aastha's* goal is to help thousands of people and their community organizations begin the process of changing the unfair system by addressing their issues and finding solutions. *Aastha's* strategy focuses on building leadership at the local level by forming people's organizations, connecting with purpose-driven groups, advocating for change, and working with the community on research and strategies. It also aims to ensure that people have access to resources from different sources to support the running of community organizations and improve their livelihoods.

Historically, these processes do not occur spontaneously; they require capable individuals, groups, or organizations with a vision to initiate them. The organization believes that such individuals or groups do not emerge on their own, which highlights the necessity of institutions like *Aastha*.

This work and these processes are not easy because social systems are deeply ingrained. Forces like traditions, caste, gender discrimination, class differences, religion, culture, and poverty create obstacles. Overcoming these challenges requires great effort, self-belief, courage, skill, understanding, and collective action.

### 1.3. Target Community

*Aastha* has worked with the tribal communities, women, marginalized groups, particularly women and single women, in southern Rajasthan. Guided by the principle of "Leadership by those who face the issues," *Aastha* has been active in the tribal-dominated districts of southern Rajasthan and at the state level. The organization has played a crucial role in fostering 6-7 purpose driven community organizations, which include thousands of male and female members.

In addition, *Aastha* has supported various similar ideology community organizations under the banner of Rajasthan Tribal Rights Forum. This support has extended to 20 small and large grassroots organizations, both directly and indirectly. The effort involves addressing local issues at the state level and advocating public issues at the national level through networking and collaboration.

## 2. Pillars of Aastha

In 1986, a group of 5-6 experienced social workers, renowned in the field of social and rural development, came together to establish *Aastha* with the aim of rights-based work for the poor and marginalized. Notable among these pioneers were the late Dr. Om Shrivastava, Jeannie Shrivastava, Bhanwar Singh Chadana, R.D. Vyas, and Ashwini Paliwal.

With the collective efforts of these similar ideology individuals, *Aastha* has established its unique identity. Over the years, it has achieved significant milestones, including famine relief efforts, campaigns for liberation from moneylenders, the Jungle-Jameen-Jan (Forest-Land-People) movement, and the Tribal Self-Governance initiative. Their combined efforts led to the establishment of the *Aakhar-Alakh*, beginning in the remote region of Kotra and evolving into the *Aastha Training Center* in Udaipur. This center has become a hub for social catalysts, focusing continuously on leadership development and fostering a community-driven approach for change.

## 3. Subjective Engagement

With the belief that "Knowledge is Power," *Aastha* has been training people to analyse their problems and take initiative in the process of finding solutions. Through continuous advocacy with community organizations, significant changes and new policies have been introduced. These include landmark welfare legislations like the Panchayati Raj Act, Tribal Self-Governance Law, Forest Rights Act, NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), Right to Information Act, and Right to Education Act, which have brought meaningful changes to society.

Tribal leadership development, women's leadership development, leadership development for specially-abled individuals, along with significant work on community rights over resources under PESA for tribal self-governance, natural resource management, community participation in community forest resource management under the Forest Rights Act, women's empowerment through leadership in Panchayats, community work under NREGA for livelihood and sustainable development, and equal education for girls under RTE.

## 4. Notable Achievements

Through *Aastha's* purpose driven work and programs, local community organizations have been formed by its vision and strategy. Some of the prominent organizations include:

- Tribal Development Forum Kotha (16,000 members)
- Wagad Labor Farmers' Organization Dungarpur-Banswara (24,000 members)
- Tribal Women's Awakening Organization Jhadol-Girva (8,500 members)
- Godwa Tribal Organization Bali (9,900 members)
- Women's Forum Rajsamand (7,700 members)
- Single Women Power Organization Rajasthan (90,000 members)
- Specially-abled Persons Organization (6,100 members)

Not only this, but all these community organizations also have their own support committees, which possess the necessary legal documents. These mainly include the Kotra Tribal Institute,

Rajsamand People's Development Institute, Wagad Labor Farmers' Institute, Samarthak Committee, and Single Women Institute, among others. Additionally, they have their operational areas and offices. These supporting institutions are working to make the community organizations sustainable.

Additionally, prior to the Forest Rights Act, a survey was conducted for approximately 22,000 people, and a list of individuals occupying forest land was provided to the government when it was believed that no one was occupying forest land. This helped in issuing individual forest rights certificates to about 48,000 people. The draft proposal for the PESA rules was prepared and submitted to the state government, leading to the notification of the Rajasthan PESA Rules, 2011, under which *Aastha* played a significant role in the ground-level implementation of the Tribal Self-Governance Campaign in 5,696 villages in scheduled areas.

## **5. Expertise and Uniqueness**

Through the strategy of "The issue belongs to their leadership," *Aastha* has focused on promoting the leadership of tribals and women from the very beginning. As a result, hundreds of leaders today are leading their communities at the district and state levels. The "rights-based" approach gives *Aastha* a unique identity at the state and national levels.

## **6. Organizational Impact**

At the village/panchayat/block/district level, people have formed their own groups/organizations. These organizations continue to be strong in their respective areas. Thousands of people are associated with these organizations. The influence of these organizations can be seen in regional politics. Hundreds of individuals associated with the organizations have become Ward Panch, Sarpanch, Panchayat Samiti members, Pradhan, Zila Parishad members, and even Legislative Assembly members over the past 38 years.

Through the collective efforts of the organizations, individual and community forest rights certificates were obtained, and livelihood development activities were carried out on this land under various schemes. *Aastha* played a leading role in the formation of peace committees under PESA Rule-12 in 4,939 revenue villages located in scheduled areas. Additionally, over 600 villages were successfully issued community forest rights certificates under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

## **7. Lessons Learned from the Work**

Working on a "rights-based" approach has presented numerous challenges for *Aastha*. In such circumstances, there was a need to change the strategies so that people's "faith" is maintained, and local leadership can awaken their own knowledge and consciousness to manage their livelihood resources while preserving and conserving the local environment and ecology.

## **8. Milestones of Success**

### **8.1 Drought Relief Work 1986-88**

Due to the efforts of the organization, proposals for drought relief were received by the panchayats in the neglected Kotra region, and a large number of drought relief initiatives were launched.

### **8.2 Hard-Earned Money Returned 1989-90**

At the end of drought, people in the Kotra area began getting trapped in the clutches of money lenders. A study of about 100 families revealed that jewellery worth 53 lakh 40 thousand rupees had been mortgaged in exchange for loans amounting to just 17,500 rupees.

### **8.3 Fair Wages for Tendu Leaf Collectors 1991-92**

The wages being paid for collecting tendu leaves in the Kotra region were found to be less than one third of the minimum wages set by the state government. To demand an increase in wages, the Tendu Leaf Struggle Committee was formed, which fought for 16 days to secure higher wages. From this experience, the "Tribal Tendu Leaf Cooperative Society" was established at the local level to maximize benefits.

### **8.4 Shrinking Forest Rights due to Wildlife Sanctuary 1992-93**

In the Fulwari Ki Nal region, which spanned over about 511 square kilo meters, was home to approximately 105 villages and around 50,000 tribal families, the state government was planning to declare it a wildlife sanctuary. To address this, the "Forest Security and Tribal Rights Protection Committee" was formed, and a large rally was organized to send a memorandum to the state government.

### **8.5 Forest Land Issue 1995**

Thousands of tribal families' livelihoods were threatened when it was claimed that the land they were cultivating belonged to the Forest Department. This movement led to the recognition of individual and community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

### **8.6 Displacement Due to Cement Factory 1995**

Approximately 300 families from the villages of Sandmariya and Koliya in the Kotra block were saved from displacement due to the establishment of a cement factory. The "Cement Factory Struggle Committee" was formed, and a stay order was obtained from the court.

### **8.7 Tribal Self-Governance Campaign 1997**

The campaign began in the tribal region of Wagad, in the village of Talai, Dungarpur. As part of the campaign, the "Village Republic Stones" placed by the community still stand to this day. There are approximately 1,000 such stones across the state's scheduled areas.

### **8.8 Right to Information and Employment Campaign & Social Audit 2005-06**

Through collective efforts of people's organizations, the Right to Information (RTI) and NREGA Acts were enacted. A social audit of NREGA was conducted, revealing significant irregularities.

### **8.9 Scheduled Area Expansion Campaign 2010-11**

The Scheduled Areas in Rajasthan were notified in 1981, but several districts, despite meeting all the criteria, were excluded. In response, Aastha, with people's organizations, conducted surveys in these areas and provided a list of about 1,200 villages to the government, advocating for their inclusion.

As a result, on May 19, 2018, the Scheduled areas were expanded to include partial areas in Pali, Rajsamand, and Chittorgarh districts.

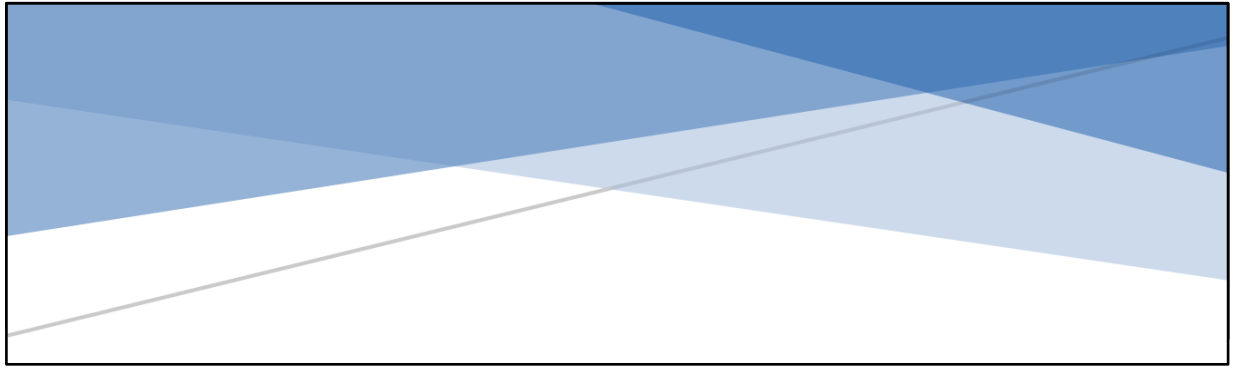
**8.10 Village Development Plan Campaign 2015-16:** The state government launched a plan to create Village Development Plans for gram panchayats. A campaign was held to ensure that village planning in the Scheduled areas was done at the revenue village level. Through advocacy at the state level, guidelines were issued to ensure that development planning in these areas occurred at the village level. People’s organizations, through PESA gram sabhas, generate proposals for development, presented them to the gram panchayats, and followed up on their implementation.

**8.11 Community Forest Rights Campaign 2021-22**

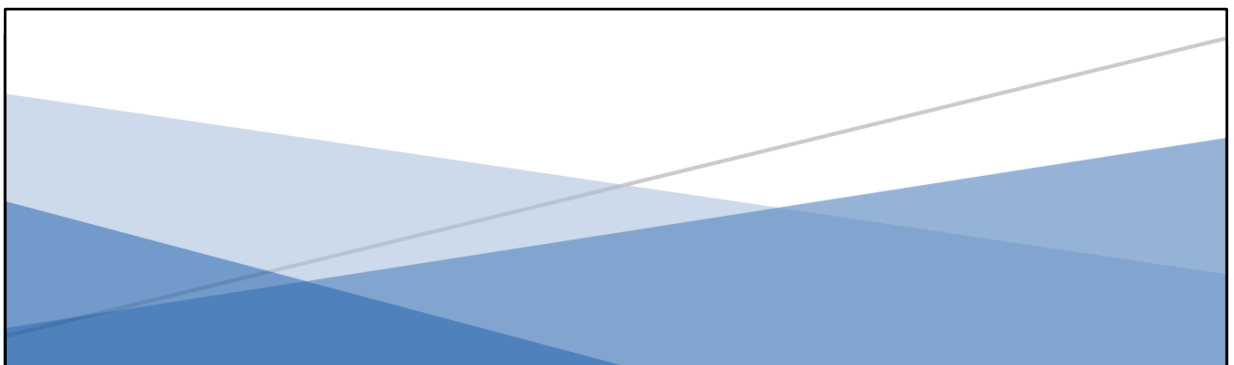
Under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, there is a provision for granting community forest resource rights under Section 3(1) to villages located in all types of forest areas.

Therefore, Aastha, in collaboration with the state government, initiated a campaign in villages of the Scheduled Areas where tribal communities have traditionally managed forest resources. Through this campaign, claims for community forest rights were presented in the gram sabhas. The state government started the process via an online portal, resulting in the approval of around 2,500 claims.





VOICES OF  
CHANGE:  
THEMATIC  
INSIGHTS FROM  
CIVIL SOCIETY  
ORGANIZATIONS  
OF RAJASTHAN



# The Voluntary Sector: Reflections of its Relevance Today

Ajay S. Mehta, Seva Mandir

During the Indian freedom struggle as well as post-independence, there has been a strong tradition of political thought that saw freedom in terms of a just, democratic, and plural society driven by voluntary action rather than state action. Ethical action on the part of individuals and local communities has been seen as the core vector to serve and transform society.<sup>1</sup>

Many thinkers in this tradition—Swami Vivekanand, Aurobindo Ghose, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, B. R. Ambedkar, M. N Roy, and Jayaprakash Narayan—felt that constructive programs undertaken by members of society were crucial to overcome poverty, untouchability, environmental degradation, and communalism. It was their belief that human nature can be cultivated to foster responsibility for the common good of society.

During the struggle for independence, these thoughts inspired many. In the princely State of Udaipur (then Mewar), the idea of Vidya Bhawan, a school, was mooted in 1931. Its vision was to make the role of responsible citizenship aspirational. To achieve this, the school had to cultivate democratic, egalitarian, and plural sensibilities, besides meaningful learning. Students must get to know poverty firsthand and appreciate nature. This was in the spirit of institutions started by Gandhi and Tagore that would, on the one hand, empower the poor and reduce the cultural gap between the educated elite and ordinary masses and, on the other hand, counter narrow-minded nationalism and militarism. In the case of Tagore, the endeavour was also to actively draw from the best of Western and Eastern civilizations. Gandhi, on his part, paid for his life while trying to bring about Hindu-Muslim amity, promote non-violence, and advocate for decentralised governance and village-based economy. These ideas were anathema to those who sought freedom from colonial rule yet subscribed to values of those very imperialists.

Post-independence, the intellectual depth and practical creativity of voluntary action has declined, while the star of the state and its leaders has risen and dominated. Many outstanding men and women from the voluntary sector accepted positions in governments. Zakir Hussain, an eminent educationist, became the President of the country. K. L. Shrimali, the first Principal of Vidya Bhawan school, succeeded Maulana Azad as India's Education Minister in the 1950s. The place of state action and voluntary action is manifested in the life of Mohan Sinha Mehta, founder of Vidya Bhawan and Seva Mandir (both Udaipur-based voluntary organizations). In the 1950s he served as Ambassador in various countries such as the Netherlands and Pakistan. In the 1960s he served as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Rajasthan. Later he recognized the limitations of state action. For instance, it was apparent that in the tribal villages of the Mewar region, the state was unable to substantially improve literacy or engage people in the meaningful exercise of democratic franchise. At the age of 71, he returned to the region to

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Dalton (2023), *Indian Ideas of Freedom*.

devote himself to voluntary action to promote adult literacy and development in small and remote rural habitations.

Despite the early post-independence turn to the state, there were important exceptions who put much more value in community action. Jayaprakash Narayan, for example, refused to join party politics even though, like Nehru, he had been an outstanding and popular leader of the national movement. Instead, he offered a sharp critique of the state. It was prescient of him to read how the state was given to concentrating and clinging to power. He saw parliamentary democracy as a tool to curtail public space and deny agency to ordinary people and self-governance. He became a great advocate of village-based constructive work. However, he did not lose interest in national affairs or global politics; instead, he called out actions by the state that were inimical to democratic principles. He was especially sensitive to the central government when it prevailed over legitimate aspirations of people living in border areas such as Kashmir and the Northeast.

The declaration of the Emergency in 1975 marked a watershed in the general opinion about the state and the voluntary sector. The public felt disenchanted with the state and the establishment because of their authoritarian actions. After the Emergency, even the political class became more interested in democratic decentralisation and people's participation in governance and development. From then on, state policies facilitated work in civil society, thanks to the redirection of aid by international agencies and foundations that had earlier only supported state interventions. Some of the work done by civil society organisations was visionary. They helped create institutions that focused on social change and not just development. They recognised that nurturing democratic and egalitarian values and agendas at the grassroots was central to building a just and ethical society. Voluntary organisations now had the space to grow organically and rediscover the ideas of *swaraj* (self-rule) in their work.

Due to helpful policies by the state and the presence of international aid, the decades of the 1980s and '90s saw the flourishing of civil society interventions. Individuals and groups resisted big dams and promoted environmental conservation, feminist causes, labor rights and the social security of workers in the informal sector, among others. NGOs also worked to alleviate poverty through health, education, forestry, and livelihood programs in remote regions of the country.

By the 1990s and the 2000s, activists were successful in creating a defensible discourse and a strong policy framework on fundamental rights to ensure employment, education, food security, and access to information. Most importantly, the sector re-emphasized the power of constructive work that brought people together across social markers of distinction and created organizational cultures that were not top-down.

This made it possible for people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to align around mutual respect and shared purpose. They managed to get villagers to transform social power and property relations away from patron-client relations based on personal or developmental benefits. What however came in the way of these transformative potentialities was a shift in the funding base of the voluntary sector. Long term institutional support from domestic and



international aid gave way to corporate funding that was tethered to the rhythms of business practices and thinking.

This meant achieving development targets in the most cost effective and quickest ways possible. This shift crowded out initiatives that sought to mobilize grass communities to non-cooperate and exercise civil disobedience against state forces and local vested interests that flouted progressive legislation such as allowing for community forest rights.

All of these examples and experiments shared above, albeit briefly, suggest that while the Indian state is essential for governance and international relations, by itself it is not—and perhaps can never be—effective in ensuring justice especially for the underprivileged, securing our ecology from wanton human destruction, and upholding values of diversity, pluralism, and Constitutional freedoms. In fact, by itself the state is becoming even less effective in the face of the burgeoning middle class and its social apathy and relentless consumerism.

Therefore, I submit that we can no longer wait to revive ideas of freedom associated with voluntarism. Now is the moment to privilege democratic, egalitarian, and nonviolent values over technological solutionism and its rhetoric of speed and efficiency.



# **Community- based healthcare for drought affected regions in India**

## **Drought and human health**

Natural disasters and calamities have affected human lives for centuries. Advances in technology have enabled predicting the occurrence of some of these disasters and early warnings in such cases do help communities prepare to face them. Droughts remain the most challenging natural disaster because of their unpredictable nature, prolonged durations and wide expanse. Many regions in India keep getting affected by droughts, however, the Western Rajasthan region of the Thar Desert in India is witness to recurrent droughts and its impact can be seen on every aspect of peoples' life in this area.

Drought affects human health in several ways; some of its effects are immediate and short term while others can be seen only over a period of time. Drought and community health have been inextricably linked together over a long period of time.

With its deep impacts on water and food availability, sanitation and livelihood options, droughts have been the root cause of health problems of communities living in arid zones. These health issues range from diseases arising from the lack of hygiene, and from conditions originated due to malnutrition to reduced immunity, and to high prevalence of infectious and non-communicable diseases.

While drought impacts all populations groups, most vulnerable remain women, children and older people. Poverty and inability of public health infrastructure to reach out to the most affected remote populations result in severe ramifications for resource deficient communities. Evidence suggests that socio economic vulnerabilities aggravate health impacts resulting from droughts and enhancing the adaptive capacities of communities can contribute in neutralising such impacts (Sharma N. 2022).

## **Effects of drought on the health of communities**

Droughts and resulting water scarcity have instantaneous as well as perpetual consequences for public health in rural settings. The condition in Thar region is more vulnerable as compared to other drought prone areas because majority of the desert population here is either dependent on agriculture or animal husbandry and both these occupations are highly contingent on the recurrence and quantum of rainfall. Availability of drinking water is limited.

In this scenario, where people do not have enough water to drink or cook, bathing and maintaining hygiene are not their priorities. Their stomach and intestines are highly vulnerable to infections from contaminated food and water leading to recurrent skin allergies, liver and stomach infections.

Grains, fruits and vegetables become scarce as well as unaffordable for the population already hit by a financial crisis because of livelihood loss. Acute food shortage underscored with the inability to buy essential food items takes a toll on the nutrition status of desert communities, especially women and children who end up with various iron, vitamin and protein deficiencies. Iron deficiencies in women have detrimental effects on their reproductive health and this is one

of the primary reasons for high infant mortality rates in the region. Stunting and wasting among children is high in Rajasthan as compared to the national average (Sharma N. 2022). These are outcomes of chronic and severe malnutrition and a direct result of droughts and water scarcity in this region.

Although the traditional occupation of the rural population in Thar desert is agriculture and cattle rearing, during recurrent drought situations people get engaged in alternative occupations, one of them being sandstone mining.

However, while the mining industry serves as a steady occupational alternative to farming, it is a silent killer. They are forced to endure ten hours of strenuous labor in the open sun without appropriate safety gear for a meagre paycheck. Underpaid, overworked with unhealthy living and working conditions, mineworkers become victims of diseases like silicosis and tuberculosis. Not to mention, their families often get caught in the trap of poverty and indebtedness leading to exploitation of generations to come.

Older persons living in places like Thar where climatic conditions are harsh and resources are scarce, are confronted with an array of challenges including poor infrastructure, lack of access and control over productive resources, social isolation and inability to contribute financially to their households. Vulnerabilities to infections and water borne diseases are additional health problems that older people have to face. These problems and challenges multiply in case of older women as they continue to face years of oppression and gender imbalance deeply rooted in the social and cultural norms.

Chronic diseases, poor vision, cataract, high blood pressure, back pain/slipped disc, dental problems, osteoarthritis, malnutrition, asthma, body weakness and pain, impaired physical abilities are significantly higher amongst women as compared to elderly men. Older women also face abuse in communities.

In many large epidemiological studies, women have shown a preponderance to mental health issues as compared to men and this may be also due to predisposed biological and social risk factors (Kaur M. & Kaur J. 2019). They are more affected by dementia, hypertension, distress, depression and psychosomatic disorders than their male counterparts. In case of severe illness, older people normally do not get the required medical support owing to the inadequacy of the public health infrastructure that have limited continuing and long-term care facilities, are insufficiently resourced, lack trained staff on geriatric health or are largely inaccessible for poor and remote households ([Tyagi P. 2013](#)).

Remotely located villages remain excluded from the Government's health systems and institutional care facilities as the long distance, difficult terrains and extreme climate discourage the public health personnel to travel to remote areas. On the other hand, private facilities, even if available, are unaffordable.

The utilisation of healthcare services is not just dependent on the availability of services and healthcare providers but is also influenced by various social, economic, cultural and other factors like cost, distance and quality of services provided (Sahoo H., et al, 2023). The pursuit of healthy ageing across the life course is intricately intertwined with several multifaceted challenges, which demand for a more robust, integrated and cost-efficient healthcare system

focused on specific needs of women, children, older members and other vulnerable groups residing in the arid regions of India.

### **Best practices to overcome health crisis triggered by droughts and water scarcity**

GRAVIS has been supporting desert communities through adaptive as well as mitigation strategies to help them overcome the health crisis triggered by droughts and water scarcity under the leadership of Dr. Prakash Tyagi, Executive Director of GRAVIS and Founder-Director of GRAVIS rural hospital.

Dr. Tyagi who is qualified in Medicine and Geriatrics has been leading the organisation since last 20 years and is an active development practitioner and public health professional. He has contributed significantly in the fields of maternal and child health, geriatrics, HIV, TB, silicosis and occupational health through his writing, research and field work. He is a part of several national and global development and health networks and initiatives and is a Clinical Professor at the School of Global Health and Medicine of University of Washington, US.

Time tested rainwater harvesting techniques and health services are the key elements of GRAVIS' interventions through which access to water, sustainable food, health infrastructure and nutrition security are being enabled towards achieving the goal of improved health profile of desert communities. GRAVIS' wide range of interventions also includes curative and diagnostic health services for mineworkers, educating the mining community on occupational health hazards and safety, formal education for mineworkers' children to prevent them from entering the vicious cycle of debt and similar occupational hazards, support to women through Self Help Groups (SHGs) and advocacy efforts focused on safe mining practices with various stakeholders.

GRAVIS reaches out to over 2 million people living in poverty with its work on water security, food security and community health in the Thar desert of India and has helped form over 4000 Community-based Organisations (CBOs) that actively lead and participate in several village development programmes.

With the aim to inculcate health seeking behaviour in communities, the organisation has been focusing on executing holistic community-based healthcare programmes. Women and older people are an integral part of designing of these interventions and are trained to fully engage in planning, implementing and monitoring village level community development projects with an emphasis on person-centric care. These initiatives have directly impacted the lives of 250,000 older people in the Thar desert of India. Some of the key components of these programmes are:

- Mobilising women, older people and farmers into community groups and associations: The most critical aspect for the effectiveness of this approach is turning to indigenous resources and skillset to design sustainable community development solutions and strategies. CBOs like SHGs, Village Older People's Associations (VOPAs) and Inter-generational Learning Groups (ILGs) have been created in the desert villages of GRAVIS' operation while ensuring inclusion of younger people as well in all village improvement programmes and trainings organized with a focus on older people, as a conscious strategy (Sharma N. 2020).

- Health education: Educating communities on health needs, double-burden of disease, self-care and preventative care alongside development of local cadres by training health workers and peer educators in maternal and child health, women's health, geriatric health and long-term care to help enhance the status of health service delivery as a whole (Tyagi P. 2024).
- Provision of direct medical services: GRAVIS' medical service delivery component includes running a fully equipped hospital in a rural setting. The facility provides all forms of primary and secondary levels of medical care to the marginalised at highly subsidized prices. In addition, GRAVIS organizes outreach medical services through Mobile Medical Units (MMUs) reaching the last mile and provide diagnostic, curative and referral services to older people within their communities.
- Initiatives targeted at drought mitigation and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) are an extremely important cross cutting element of GRAVIS' community-based healthcare programmes as these affect human lives in general and greatly contributes to improved health and well-being of people from desert regions with chronic drought conditions. These community-led strategies anchored by older people and women ensure access to nutritious food by organizing horticulture units, promote healthy and active ageing through a series of self-care sessions and creation of assets like rainwater harvesting structures and farming dykes to address long term issues of community's water and food insecurities (Sripada J. 2022).
- Documentation, evidence-based research and advocacy: GRAVIS strongly believes in documenting its learning and experiences by analysing its successes and shortcomings to modify future programmes and maximise the impact of its outcomes to promote replication. As a result of these research interventions, several studies have been published generating evidence for replication and scaling up of successful programmes.

### **Future of community health and drought mitigation**

Achieving improved health and nutrition status through drought mitigation is a result of a combination of factors. Complex socio economic and climatic condition dilutes the effort and poses new challenges. Gaps in provision of health services will derail the journey towards achieving better health status for communities. Ensuring steady progress on the health indicators of rural communities demand further replication and intensification of endeavours.

It is extremely important to make healthcare available on a regular basis so that communities can rely on them for a longer term. Efforts should be accelerated to incorporate intergenerational approach to learning as it will trigger knowledge sharing and discussions on emerging issues and challenges among people of different age groups.

Participation of women, children, older members of the family and adolescents will create possibilities for new ideas and help in mobilising community resources for drought mitigation and maintenance of good health. Partnering with civil society organisations and building their capacities will help in expanding drought mitigation efforts significantly in climatic zones similar to the Thar region in India. Good practices of sustainable rainwater harvesting practices

and drawing its link with good health and wellbeing of community as a whole, needs to be shared with other organisations interested in implementing community-based drought mitigation programmes.

It is of utmost importance that drought mitigation is oriented towards improved health and overall wellbeing of desert communities. Institutionalisation of measures that have shown positive impact will ensure increased public investment and prioritisation of the specific needs of vulnerable communities in dryland regions of India.

Civil society dialogues and discussions with policy makers along with the sharing of evidence on the health outcomes of rainwater harvesting and other drought mitigation endeavours will persuade them to support accessible and quality health care for all as well as micro initiatives to mitigate droughts.

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# **Contribution of Non-Governmental Organizations in Tribal Rights in Rajasthan**

## **Tribal Self-Governance System Will Ensure Management of Natural Resources**

### **1. Introduction**

The Scheduled Area of the state spans 9 districts, 50 tehsils, and 1,620 gram panchayats, covering 5,696 villages. This area falls under the "Scheduled Area" as per Article 244, Clause 1 of the Constitution. The Tribal Self-Governance system is implemented here. The Governor of the state is the custodian of this area, and through them, an annual report is submitted to the President of India.

### **2. Subject Matter Relevance**

Tribal self-governance is the traditional system of the tribal community, in which this community has been managing the community resources of their villages for centuries. This traditional system is recognized in Article 13 (3)(c) of the Indian Constitution. After the recommendations of the Bhuria Committee in 1994, the "Extension of Provisions of Panchayats to Scheduled Areas" Act was passed by the Indian Parliament on December 24, 1996, which is known as the PESA (Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas)) Act, and is recognized by the tribal community and others in this area.

In the 1990s, under the leadership of various people's organizations in Southern Rajasthan, the "Jungle Zameen Jan Abhiyan" (Forest Land People's Campaign) was at its peak. Through this campaign, the first Justice Dr. Judkar Committee was formed to work on the implementation of the Self-Governance (PESA) Act in collaboration with a network of 10 tribal-majority states of India. Based on the recommendations of the unique Tribal Bhailchandra Mungerkar Committee Report of 2005, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 was passed by the Indian Parliament.

When the central government asked the Rajasthan government how many tribal people were residing on forest land, the state government denied the existence of any such cases. In response, under the banner of the Jungle Zameen Jan Abhiyan (Forest Land People's Campaign), all tribal people's organizations conducted their own surveys in their respective areas and presented the names, along with documents, of approximately 22,000 individuals to the state's Tribal Regional Development Department/Forest Department.

After the Forest Rights Act, 2006, the leadership of the Jungle Zameen Jan Andolan (Forest Land People's Movement) organized a nationwide campaign to demand the rules for the settlement of such cases. As a result, the rules were notified in 2008.

### **3. Challenges:**

After independence, the intervention of the Forest Department increased even in the tribal self-governance areas, following the paths of the Biodiversity Act, 1972, and the Forest Act, 1980, which were resistant to accepting the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Not only that, but this historic Forest Rights Act faced opposition in many states, with IFS officers even reaching the Supreme Court. As a result, the implementation of this welfare Act and its rules in the state faced as much struggle as the efforts to get it passed in Parliament.

**4. Strategy:**

In such a scenario, the Jungle Zameen Jan Andolan decided to conduct a village-to-village awareness campaign through foot marches and rallies via each of its members, to educate the tribal communities residing on forest land. People carried firewood and kitchen supplies from their homes and staged an indefinite sit-in at the office of the Commissioner, Tribal Regional Development Department, as well as at the District and Block Forest Department sub-division offices. Additionally, delegations of various stakeholders met with the government to apply pressure for action.

**5. Success Story:**

Bhoparam Dhulaji Garasia, a resident of the revenue village Kundal in the Bali Panchayat Samiti of Pali district, had been living on the land since before independence. His house was destroyed by the Forest Department in 2002. At that time, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, had not yet been enacted. The local Godwad Adivasi Organization visited the site and found all the household items scattered, with Choparam in an unconscious state. Taking initiative, a First Information Report (FIR) was filed, and the case was presented in the local ADJ Court. Through continuous monitoring and effective advocacy, a decision was made in favour of Choparam under the Forest Rights Act. Today, Choparam sustains his livelihood by farming on the land that his family has occupied for generations.

**6. Lesson:**

The struggle to bring the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, was immense, and equally challenging will be its ground-level implementation. Bureaucrats have even advocated in the Supreme Court to withdraw the FRA. Therefore, it will be crucial for people's organizations to remain united in protecting the Act and ensuring that the livelihoods and identity of the tribals are preserved through continuous collective efforts.

**7. Future Direction:**

The threat of climate change looms globally. It is crucial to continue working with tribal communities to protect their civil rights. The lifestyle of tribal communities has always been based on collectivism, participation, and co-existence. This philosophy must be advanced in the direction of community-based forest conservation, enhancement, protection, and management to safeguard the Earth and preserve local environments and ecosystems.

