Voices of the Invisible

Understanding gender equity and power of decentralization leading to sustainability, prosperity, justice and equity

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Before India got independence in 1947, some 200-odd princes ruled over Saurashtra, the jaw-shaped land of Gujarat jutting into the Arabian Sea. Even Mahatma Gandhi’s birthplace, Porbandar, was ruled by a prince.

Though all the princely states have long merged with the independent India, feudal mentality still rules the minds of people of the Saurashtra region. Men are divined to rule over women is the typical mindset.

The women of Saurashtra have been suffering for long the brutalities of this male-dominated society. Suppressed by the men in their families, they had no say in deciding how to meet the basic needs of their life – water, food, fuel and fodder.

Women had to fight a savage battle for survival and do backbreaking work every day. Since they, and not the men, had to fetch drinking water from distant and scarce sources, women fought women over a pitcher of water, often leading to bloody conflicts. The older women in the region have seen wells and ponds going dry, and water turning undrinkable - salty, muddy.

They did know why so many in the village had skin diseases. Why several women had miscarriages or some other difficulties in child-bearing? Why children often fell ill, complaining of loose motion, vomiting, pain or fever? Why the legs and limbs of people turned so weak that they find it painful and difficult to walk even at the age of 40, sometimes even less?

The root cause of the violent conflicts and illness amongst women has been an acute shortage of drinking water in the region.
The men who ruled over the family, the civil, social, financial and political institutions has been running after the mirage of wealth and prosperity, blind to the trail of destruction they were leaving behind.

In their greed for money, farmers started growing cash crops such as cotton and groundnut on more and more land. Hybrid cotton and groundnut need more water, more chemical fertilizer and more pesticides.

Farmers started drawing more and more water for irrigating their land. The government’s policy of providing highly subsidized electricity to the farmers accelerated the process of exploiting groundwater resources, resulting in depletion of water.

The groundwater level fell down and the seawater started seeping into the wells and ponds. Both the land and water resources turned saline.

The once verdant land in the coastal Bhavnagar and Amreli districts of Saurashtra stands ravaged today.

This peninsular region is a classic case of man’s savagery against the nature. It shows how indiscriminate use of ground water resources for cultivation of cash crops has turned a once fertile land that boasted of rich mangroves and orchards into a highly saline barren region.

The poor are the worst sufferers. They became poorer and fell victim to crippling diseases like fluorosis. The poor are forced to migrate to cities and towns in search of employment.

Women are left behind to look after the children, the elders and the cattle. Women are additionally burdened with the task of collecting wood for fuel and fodder for the cattle, the two other resources that have become scarce along with drinking water.

The most devastating effect of this wild chase for commercial crops –mainly cotton and groundnut – was felt on the grassland that provided fodder for the cattle. As grass became scarce, the cattle started starving. Unable to feed their cattle, people started selling their cows, bullocks and buffalos, quite often to butchers. Many a milk cooperatives have had to close down.

The government did try to mitigate the suffering of the people. But these efforts have not only failed to address the problem but, compounded it. The government interventions have only benefited the socially and politically powerful communities, leaving the poor to fend for themselves.

The government-sponsored schemes of supplying drinking water through pipelines and tankers triggered off violent conflicts, bred corruption and increased gender inequities.
The local self-government body, the *Panchayat*, through which the government executed its various development programs, failed to find sustainable basic livelihood resources, including drinking water, fodder and fuel.

**Emergence of a Mass Movement**

This has been the scenario in the entire coastal region of Gujarat when Utthan, a non-governmental organization, started organizing the village community for finding sustainable solutions to their basic livelihood problems.

Founded in 1981 by four professional women, Utthan Development Action Planning Team first started work in the Bhal region of Ahmedabad.

Violent conflicts among women over drinking water had become a matter of every day affair in the villages of Bhal. In every sense, Bhal was a land of mirage. With scorching sun and flat barren desert-like land, created mirage wherever the eyes went.

Utthan began to work among the women, organizing them on the every day livelihood issues. Several village-level institutions were set up in the region. Pani Samitis (Water Committees), Mahila (women) Samitis, Yuvak (youth) Samitis, Watershed Committees and Gram Sabhas (village councils) were formed to address problems related to water, sanitation, health and employment.
The result of these community organization and mass awareness efforts was a powerful women’s movement and the creation of an institution named ‘Mahiti’.

This movement created such a powerful pressure on the local / state level bureaucracy that the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board (GWSSB) was compelled to support decentralized rain water harvesting structures in the villages. Till then, the GWSSB was supplying drinking water through pipelines, a centralized system that not only bred corruption but was one of the main causes of violent conflicts.

The social movement initiated by Utthan and Mahiti in Bhal focused on community managed drinking water resource development. One positive outcome of such intense community organizational processes was that it, in turn, inspired another small but noteworthy and successful social protest by women.

It was directed against an exploitative indigenous money lending system run by Darbars - the most powerful caste in the area. As a result, not only the money lending system of Darbars crumbled, it gave the women an opportunity to organize themselves into vibrant community groups and undertake their own savings, credit, and income generating activities.

Utthan withdrew from Bhal in 1994 after having helped Mahiti to build its organizational capability to continue with the development efforts in the region.

The Movement Spreads

Armed with the rich experience gained in Bhal, the Utthan team decided to share the experience with the women of several villages of the adjoining Bhavnagar and Amreli district which too had a feudal legacy and similar geo-climatic conditions to that of the Bhal region. Like in Bhal, the Utthan team began organizing the various community groups around basic livelihood issues. The community organizing efforts not only created awareness among the men and women about the causes of their sufferings, but also gave them a platform to express their views, discuss the various options and coming to a consensus in their village on the ways and means of solving their problems.
By holding discussions, organizing film shows and arranging visits of the women to the Bhal villages where women were playing a key role in the creation and management of natural resources, the message of women’s empowerment, participation in decision-making, planning and implementing alternative systems of solving basic livelihood issues was spread among the people of these villages of Bhavnagar and Amreli districts.

This helped the team as well as key leaders and community volunteers in the villages not only gain a better understanding of the issues, but also of the ways to address them. Such capacity enhancement has motivated many of them to take on the issues at different levels within the community with more confidence.

Through Utthan’s intervention, through building and strengthening village level institutions, women of several villages of Bhavnagar and Amreli districts have actively taken part in identifying and implementing various sustainable drinking water resources such as rainwater roof harvesting systems and construction of check-dams which help in recharging of wells to meet the needs of their entire village.

These measures have lessened people’s dependence on government, made them self-reliant, given them a feeling of ownership and have tried to reverse the process of corrosion and degeneration of water and land resources.

The availability of secure and safe drinking water at their doorstep freed the women of the burden of trekking miles and enabled them devote time and energy on various income-generating activities. There has been an overall 40-50 per cent increase in local employment opportunities.
for the landless and marginal farmers because of a substantial rise in farming activities in the village on account of availability of water.

The rise in awareness among women about health and hygienic practices to ensure that the family drinks only safe drinking water had a direct impact on their health. There has been a marked decline in the incidence of water-borne diseases in the villages.

Utthan team’s focus and emphasis on addressing gender issues in all village level institutions and forums has helped to a great extent in highlighting the different gender needs and issues concerning women such as their lack of ownership over resources, decision making, etc.

This has resulted in articulation of the issues, quite often triggering off conflicts within families or at the community level where the demand for equity would mean end of privilege and monopoly of a few and result in sharing of resources and power with others.

Beginning of a New Awakening

Take the case of Neswad village of Bhavnagar district where two women members of the Pani Samiti, came out in the open in support of the other women of the village for a common cause and faced the wrath of their husbands. The firmness of these women helped win over their husbands who, convinced of the just cause of the women folk, soon became active partners in the community development process.

The Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board (GWSSB), a state government agency, and the Royal Netherlands Embassy, had decided to fund a drinking water supply project for Neswad village. A well was to be dug, downstream of a check-dam, where potable drinking water, free of fluorine and saline, was available. The water was to be brought to the village through a pipeline, stored in an overhead tank, and distributed through stand-posts.

Being the local self-government body, the Gram Panchayat (the village council elected through popular votes for a five-year term), was to execute the project. The Sarpanch (head of the Gram Panchayat), favored employing a machine to dig the trench for laying of the pipeline, arguing that this was not only more economical but efficient way of completing the project in shortest possible time.

But the women of the village were against the mechanized way of digging the trench and wanted it to be done with manual labour as the village, under the grip of a severe drought, needed employment. The women favoured manual labour also because it would give the people of the village a strong feeling of ownership.
The Sarpanch was dead against this, apparently because if he let the village folks do the digging and earn wages, he would lose his commission that was assured him by the supplier of the digging machine.

Leading and articulating the women’s demand for employing manual labour were members of the local Pani Samiti, Monghiben, the wife of the younger brother of the Sarpanch, and Baluben, the wife of elder brother of the deputy Sarpanch. The two leaders of the Gram Panchayat, used their brothers to bring pressure on their wives to give up their insistence on employing manual labour and allow the mechanization process.

Baluben’s husband, whose elder brother was the deputy Sarpanch, banned her from going out and socializing with the other women members of the Pani Samiti. To this, Baluben said she would not go out provided her husband too restricted himself to their home and did not mix with his friends. The embargo continued for a few months till the local Navratri festival when, being a ballad and a bard, Baluben’s husband could no more afford to abide by the ban and wanted to go out and mix with his group.

At last the ban on Baluben’s movement outside her home and attending meetings with the other women of the village had to be lifted.

Monghiben, whose husband’s elder brother was the Sarpanch stood to gain monetarily from mechanized digging, continued rallying support in the village for entrusting the work to the unemployed to be able to sustain at a time when the entire region was reeling under drought.
The Sarpanch was put to shame by the actions of some villagers who volunteered to dig the trench without taking any money so that the needier could be employed and get wages.

Unable to withstand the moral pressure from the rest of the village, the Sarpanch gave in and agreed that the digging of the trench be taken up by the people manually. The women, on their part, assured the Sarpanch that the task would be completed much before the deadline. And, completed it was well before the deadline.

While the work on the overhead tank and the stand-post for the water supply scheme was on, some women noticed that the contractor was mixing more sand in cement, with the obvious intent of making more profit at the cost of quality. The women raised a hue and cry and the contractor could not succeed in duping the villagers.

Women as Moral Guardian

In Neswad, a vigilant squad of women has been guarding the overhead tank of the community water supply scheme to prevent pilferage of water by the members of a headstrong section of the village who have refused to contribute to the common pool of fund required for maintenance and repairs.
The Gram Panchayat of NESWAD had expressed its inability to enforce such a ban expressing the fear that this would lead to violent conflict in the village. The women of the village, however, proved themselves braver than the men-dominated Gram Panchayat and took up the responsibility of enforcing the prohibition on lifting of water by the defaulting villagers.

Though they have imposed the ban, on matter of principle that everyone must contribute to the common pool of fund, the women also realized that it was the women of the ex-communicated section who were going to suffer the most, and not the men who had refused to part with the money.

So, efforts are now on to convince the women of the ex-communicated families to mount pressure on the men to give up their pride and comply with the decision of the rest of the village.

It is not just the case of a majority of villagers against the minority. Disciplinary action has also been initiated within a family as happened in KUDA village where the mother has banned her grown-up son to draw water from the rainwater collection tank because he has not contributed a dime for its maintenance.

These are but a few examples of how women, when woken up and made aware of their rights, empowered to take active part in managing the natural resources, can be firm in their resolve, curb corruption, be committed to the welfare of the underprivileged and enforce a strict discipline on the entire community to achieve sustainable, decentralized and eco-friendly development. In NESWAD, the poor and the landless have employment opportunities in their own village. The need not migrate to cities and towns.

Of Sensitized Men

Let us take a look at how the women in the coastal region of Gujarat are trying to reverse the process of environmental degradation by influencing the men to strike a balance between cash crops and sustainable cultivation. RABADA is one of the five villages in Amreli district where the Utthan team has been active since 1995, creating awareness among the people on gender equity and creation of sustainable sources of livelihood.

Like in so many other villages, the wells of RABADA too had turned saline and the groundwater table gone down.

The villagers, in consultation with the Utthan team, constructed a check dam on the nearby Ramtali river. This helped in raising the groundwater table and more water is now available for irrigation. This had direct impact on the lives of the local farmers.
Ramjibhai Gajera is one such farmer. He owns 50 vigha of land of which he could earlier irrigate only 20 vighas. Now he is able to irrigate all of his land. In the past, he used to grow groundnut, millets and grass on the land. Today, because of more water available for irrigation, the groundnut yield of his land has gone up from 300 kg to 350-400 kg.

Ramjibhai could have decided to grow only groundnut on the entire land and earned more cash. But he decided to retain the same ratio as in the past of growing groundnut, millet and grass. Because of the increased yield, he not only gets more groundnut but also 200 kg of millets and 10,000 kg of grass.

“If I had grown groundnut on the entire land, I would have earned more cash. But then, my wife would have had to walk miles to collect fodder for our cattle,” says Ramjibhai. With the additional income, there has been much improvement in the quality of life of the entire family”

It was because of women’s initiative that 70 per cent of the drinking water requirement of Rabada village could be met through recharging of 100 wells and repairing of hand pumps.

The government had sanctioned funds just enough for 60 wells under the watershed development program. But the women decided to mobilize the additional fund by collecting Rs 150 from each household and making the people agree to contribute their labor free.

Because of the watershed development program under which check dams have been constructed, wells have been recharged and other alternative methods of harvesting rainwater have been put in place, people of several villages of Amreli and Bhavnagar districts have been able to meet most of their drinking water, fodder and fuel requirements through locally-created sources.

Making available secure and safe drinking water at their doorstep is one major step that has unleashed women’s power, freeing them of drudgery and diseases, and enabling them to channelize their time and efforts for improving the living conditions of their family.
Lessons Learnt

- Real decentralization means people’s participation in decision-making, implementation and management and the freedom to choose between alternatives.

- Providing safe and secured drinking water is a single step that can generate substantial employment opportunities in the villages, thus putting a brake on forced migration.

- Spreading awareness on health, hygiene and sanitation is a pre-requisite for ensuring safe drinking water and better health conditions.

- Harvesting and managing rain water at the local level is a powerful means to build communities’ own resources.

- Appropriate institutional mechanism providing space to women and poor at the local level could unleash energy required to overcome many obstacles.

- Women have to play a key role in changing and altering existing power structures as equal partners and managers.

- Investment on capacity building, organizing, institution building is an absolute must for empowerment of women and achieve sustainable development.

- Only a sensitive leadership and a feeling of ownership among them can lead to sustainability, organic growth and a mass movement.