FLYING WITH THE CRANE

Recapturing KMVS's ten-year journey

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CHAPTER I

Background and overview

Introduction:

Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (henceforth KMVS) came into being in 1989 in the Kutch region of Gujarat with the objective of working with poor rural women. Its overarching mission is the total empowerment of rural women through their conscientisation, organisation, and mobilisation into local collectives capable of independently addressing gender inequities in the development process and engendering a sustainable socio-economic transformation in the region. In the last ten years KMVS has grown from a three-person venture into a dynamic organisation of 40 staff members and 7000 rural members spread over 4 Talukas and 150 villages with an annual budget of approximately Rs.1crore. The initial intervention centred on making handicraft production a viable economic activity and gradually, in tandem with women's expressed interests, KMVS has evolved a multiple yet integrated foci on handicrafts, credit, health, education, natural resource management, domestic violence, and recently capacity building of Mahila Sarpanches in local self-government institutions.

This transition has been eventful. Starting off with scepticism and hostility on part of the villagers during the initial encounters, KMVS today has gradually established a rapport with the community. The ten-year journey has been demanding, challenging, exhilarating and also at times disillusioning. These experiences have resonated across the district and the state, as theirs has not been a solitary endeavour. KMVS has actively networked and established reciprocal relationships and strategic alliances with varied individuals and organisations at different stages of this journey. Poised at the beginning of a new millennium, KMVS is trying to consolidate its work and take on the new emerging challenges.

Given the flux in the larger civil society, KMVS members felt a need to critically reflect on their past trajectory - of growth and changing priorities, successes and failures, shifts in governance and management, experiences of old and new shareholders and partners - in order to develop their future direction. There is also a desire to share their experiences and reflections with partners, as well as the larger society through a critical appraisal of their methodology of empowerment and through such a reading, contribute to and build upon alternative praxis in the area of development, gender, and empowerment.

This document is at the behest of KMVS and is an effort to hold up a mirror to their journey. It is a documentation of their history, context, evolution, and experiences since its emergence in 1989. Additionally, it is also an attempt to critically foreground and map out the conceptual ruminations relating to gender, development, empowerment, and participation that frame KMVS's processes and strategies. We no longer have the luxury of operating within a world where the differences between the competing discourses of "development" and "alternative development" are fixed or self-evident. The conceptual

language that differentiated the discourses in the days of yore – of participation, sustainable development, gender, agency, and empowerment – are the cornerstones of what constitutes "development" today. It is in this context that KMVS experience has been located.

The 1980s saw the sudden spurt of women's organisations across the country. This was the time when the development world rediscovered the importance of women in development (popularly known as the WID phase). Since the Nairobi Women's Conference women's empowerment has acquired a legitimate space in development funding. The Government of India established a separate Department of Women and Child Development and several state governments, including Gujarat, appointed a Commissioner for Women and Child Development. Yielding to the demand of the women's movement, the Government constituted the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector (Chaired by Smt. Ela Bhat). Mahila Samakhya – Education for Women's Equality (Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat) was launched in 1988. The National Perspective Plan for Women was also formulated in 1989. The overall climate in the country was one of optimism and the government was seen as an important player in women's struggle for justice and equality. That was not all; the availability of donor funds for women's programmes also went up significantly. Almost every donor set aside significant proportion of resources for women's organisations and projects on women. Availability of donor funding in this field contributed in no small measure to growth of voluntary sector's interest in women's programmes.

It was in this larger climate of optimism that a number of concerned individuals and social activists attempted to establish voluntary organisations. Gujarat in particular witnessed the growth of a range of grassroots organisations working on environment education, primary healthcare, health education, appropriate technology and so on. The mid-1980s also witnessed growing polarisation in civil society – along caste and community lines. There was a growing feeling that issues of survival and sustainable development, especially of the poor and marginalised communities and areas, were getting out of focus and populist slogans and political clichés were taking their place. By the mid-1970s, significant sections of the Dalits, tribals, the backward among the Other Backward classes, and the poor and landless among the minorities were excluded from mainstream society. They were only approached for votes during elections. "Their economic issues ethnicised and communalised for electoral gains, but their struggle for survival and dignity ceased to be issues in mainstream politics. Further since the population in question are dispersed and fragmented on many dimensions – class, caste, gender, religion, identity, language – they were dismissed by the political parties, including those of the left, as simply unorganisable. The giving up of the 'movement' aspect of politics not only concerted the parties into mere electoral machines, but also ceased to inform the processes of government formation and policymaking. Even trade unions displayed relative ineptitude in expanding their activities into the informal sector of the economy. The emergence of grassroots movements and voluntary organisations needs to be located within the larger context of retreat of institutional politics. Young people who were radicalised in the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and later

disillusioned by the gradual collapse of radical movements were eager to create new organisations and initiate movements that could move into the niches yielded by mainstream forces. ". (Sethi 1993, 77)

The 1980s thus saw the growth of sporadic and short-run movements that addressed specific issues like dowry deaths, bonded labour, human rights, land rights etc. Some of them took institutional forms, notably the farmers' movement, environment and ecology groups, women's organisations, adult education and conscientisation, legal education etc. When these "pro-poor" agendas were taken out of formal political parties and trade unions, national and international donors (including progressive forces in the government) snatched the opportunity to channel resources for development. Middle class professionals also recognised the opportunity to become development workers, used their professional training, communication and networking skills to access resources. By the close of the decade of the 1980s, India had a vibrant development community – labelled as NGOs.

The 1980s was also a learning decade – different models of development were tried out with varying degrees of success. We had before us an impressive body of experience of successes and failures. For every genuine grassroots organisation there were several "development shops" and failed promises. Organisations like KMVS that emerged in the late 1980s had the opportunity to learn from the experience of others. The larger social and political context in which KMVS emerged is thus of considerable importance. They had before them a range of models and also some feedback on their impact. The pioneering team of KMVS was not just a group of committed people who decided to change the world upside down; they were a group of women who were aware of the larger social, political and cultural context of development.

Methodology:

Sushma Iyengar, executive secretary of KMVS, when called upon to explain the purpose and meaning of this ten-year review and documentation exercise to a group of rural women, did so by drawing upon women's rich tradition of embroidery in the region. She explained it as being similar to their daily practice (individual as well as collective) of appraising their embroidering efforts after finishing a particular motif to check for discrepancies as well as visualise how the finished piece would or should emerge. This analogy provides an initial cue regarding how KMVS and we as external facilitators have jointly operationalised the concept of "documentation" in this exercise. The documentation has largely been based on the analysis of descriptions-qualitative and quantitative-of work to date and conversations (formal and informal) that took place through a series of internal meetings with the KMVS team and its grassroots workers.

The Context - Political Economy of Kutch:

Kutch, comprising of 9 Talukas, accounts for 24% of the total area of Gujarat state in western India. It is the second largest district in the country. It has a fragile ecosystem – a consequence of what is termed by some as a "schizophrenic ecological divide" with the sea in the South and the desert towards the North. The desert area covers a vast expanse of 3,885 kilometres and the coastline traverses 352 kilometres and this geography ensures

that the whole of Kutch falls in the semi-arid zone of Gujarat. There are approximately 1 million people in Kutch with a very low population density of 27 people per square kilometre. Moreover, the population is rather heterogeneous, divided along lines of caste and religion; most of them are descendants of people who have immigrated to the region in the last 1000 years – the most recent being groups that arrived from Pakistan in 1971. With an average annual precipitation of 340mm in the region, 7 out of the 9 Talukas are identified as being drought prone – making the issue of water scarcity and threat of drought as a source of major concern and ongoing struggle for the Kutch population. The Bhuj ridge that runs across the centre of Kutch is the only source of fresh groundwater in the district. The incidence of drought has become regular and any 5-year cycle has 2-3 years of drought. The indigenous grasslands, known as Banni, have been devastated due to the unchecked spread of a fuel wood species "Prosopis Juliflora" (originally introduced by the state to check salinity ingress), increasing soil salinity, growing frequency of droughts, and overgrazing.

The traditional economic base of Kutch households is a varying combination of dryland agriculture and animal/cattle breeding. Traditionally the Muslim and tribal "Rabaris" are engaged in cattle breeding and animal husbandry; the "Ahirs" and the upper caste "Darbars" are agriculturists as well as raise cattle; the Dalits are engaged in various kinds of craft production; and the marginalised "Kolis" subsist on fishing and collection of minor forest produce. Although the average cattle and landholding in the district is higher in comparison to rest of the state, the productivity of these assets have been eroded due to the larger political economy of drought and environmental deterioration. This has further mired the larger community in a vicious cycle of debt and non-recovery, a situation that has worsened with the introduction of cash crops and milch cattle in the last two decades. Cash crops, like isabgol, groundnuts, and castor, promise high economic returns but end up jeopardising the food security of households. These crops have no immediate subsistence use and require marketing to generate cash revenues, which in turn demands an affordable and dependable distribution system for purchase of essential resources like food grains and fodder – which is lacking. Further, the shift in livestock rearing from cows to buffaloes has meant further dependency on the state during periods of drought. Cows being light-footed animals could be walked far and wide in search of water and fodder; buffaloes however need to be transported by motorised vehicles to the state-run cattle camps during drought.

The steady erosion of natural resources has also meant the loss of other viable sources of income. Collection of minor forest produce (honey, gum), despite being labour and time intensive and low paying, provided a safety net for families in summer. There is growing empirical evidence that this onus is steadily being put on the girl child often at the cost of her education. People's lack of control over their own lives becomes poignantly evident especially in areas where even drinking water needs to be supplied by tankers and pipelines. A KMVS-Sahjiwan study reveals that if one incorporated the infrastructural and transportation costs of piped water and compared it to the cost of milk, the latter would be cheaper at Rupees 4 per litre as opposed to Rupees 7 for water[1]. The deterioration of the environment and the unsustainable nature of processes initiated by the

[1] This information was given to us during a joint meeting with KMVS and Sahjiwan's core teams.

state under the guise of drought relief have completely undermined the self-sufficiency of the region as well as the people. Further, the social cohesion of villages and communities is getting fragmented due to increased economic hardships, resulting in large-scale out-migration of men and cattle for fodder and subsistence. Migration leads to loss of bargaining power and inevitable acceptance of low wages and poor living and working conditions. Female-headed households are steadily emerging on the landscape and increasing ruptures are becoming visible in the earlier observed interdependence of communities and households for cash, milk, and fodder to sustain themselves.

The steady erosion of household's primary productive assets – land and cattle – has also meant an increasing dependence on handicraft production – particularly embroidery. The Gujarat State Handicraft Board (henceforth GSHDC) was set up in 1973 to preserve traditional embroidery skills as well as to promote handicraft production as a viable economic activity, especially during drought. Till 1984-85 GSHDC procured 25% of Kutch embroidery, which in turn constituted at least 75% of GSHDC's overall procurement. The unrelenting consecutive droughts of 1985-88 led to a massive commercialisation of handicrafts as more and more families started depending on it for survival. In the absence of alternative means of sustainable livelihood there was a large-scale entry of non-traditional low skilled women and men in craft production. Further, GSHDC had also initiated employment generation schemes based on traditional crafts and increased its procurement for its "Gurjari" retail outlets. There was a manifold increase in the scale of production and supply and yet the process of production remained unchanged.

Although a centralised procurement centre was instituted in Bhuj direct interaction with the producers remained a distant dream since most of the producers were women whose mobility was inhibited by social norms. The ubiquitous middlemen, who pay meagre wages to the producers while retaining a high personal mark-up, hijacked the procurement process. What further complicated the situation was that most of these middlemen belonged to the community (lead artisans or husbands of women artisans); hence this precluded collective action by the people against them. The production process was increasingly marked by alienation of the worker from the product and its sale. The very economic viability of handicraft production, the last resort of million households in the Kutch, was in jeopardy as there was a glut in the market accompanied by the homogenisation of craft and a steep drop in product quality.

The varied natures of livelihood strategies practised by Kutch households are typical of a drought economy and impose multiple burdens on women. On average, rural women in Kutch have a 19-hour work schedule – with 3-4 hours devoted to accessing water for domestic use. During drought, – which happens to be every other year, embroidery and drought relief work are the main source of income. Women in Kutch are not a homogenous group. Their situation varies with the community and the nature of their productive labour. Among the higher caste women - "Darbar" (Rajput) and "Syed" (Muslim) - the practice of "Ojhal"[2] is much stronger and these women face greater

[2] "Ojhal" refers to restrictions on mobility only as opposed to "purdah" which in its most restricted meaning refers to a sight barrier.

restrictions on their mobility. Restrictive social norms have meant that it is only in exceptional circumstances that women engage in labour outside of home and hence avoid bearing the much talked about "double burden". This however tends to foster a strong dependency on men and family; it is observed that these communities also witness a higher incidence of physical and mental violence against women. Women belonging to the lower class/caste also face restrictions on their mobility; however, economic necessity creates spaces that allow for negotiation on these norms and other aspects of gender relations. Along with this space also comes the responsibility and burden of household survival.

Demographic indicators of women's status relating to health and education in Kutch further add to the dismal picture. A high fertility rate coupled with lack of gynaecological facilities at the local Taluka level and dependency on private medical care in Bhuj (70-150 km from all Taluka offices) has resulted in a 96% rate of anaemia and an infant mortality rate of 89:1000[3]. According to a survey conducted in Pachcham Taluka, in the last ten years 1 out of every 3 child has failed to survive. The area also has an abnormally high percentage of women suffering from leucorrhea and prolapsed uteruses. Lack of clean and adequate water and unsanitary conditions has also meant a very low overall health status and an increase in monthly medical expenses. A study on health expenditure done in 1996 by KMVS in the Pachcham Taluka indicates an average expense of Rupees 400 every month per household. Literacy levels are as low as 0-5% and can be viewed as a consequence of the political economy of drought which demands child and adult female labour for survival. The pitiful lack of an educational infrastructure compounded by an emphasis on Gujarati as a medium of instruction (as opposed to the local dialect – Kutchi) has ensured an absence of "functional" schools on one hand and the complete neglect of the educational process on the other.

The Genesis

KMVS entered the scene within this larger political-economic context in 1989 and has subsequently evolved as a significant developmental actor in the region. At that time, there was a collective concern among certain government departments, especially GSHDC, regarding the unfolding economic crises in Kutch and its implications for poor rural craftswomen. The head of GSHDC had been in contact with JanVikas, a support NGO based in Ahmedabad, regarding possible interventions. The catalysing agent however, was Ms. Iyengar, the current executive secretary of KMVS, who had recently returned from Cornell University with a degree in development communications and more significantly with the intention of working with and for poor women's empowerment in rural Gujarat. She came in contact with Gagan Sethi and Phiroz Contractor of Jan Vikas. At that time the Commissioner of Women and Child Welfare also happened to hold the post of Managing Director of Gujarat Women's Economic Development Commission (henceforth GWEDC). Together they initiated dialogue with GSHDC. A collaborative understanding emerged between these participants regarding the urgent need to initiate a holistic process of education and empowerment of rural women in Kutch – not just craftswomen as GSHDC had envisaged earlier. KMVS was thus conceived of, to quote an official KMVS document:

[3] Pachcham health status survey conducted by KMVS in 1996.

> "As an independent organisation of poor rural women, that would work towards developing women's ability and confidence to address issues of their concern; and develop their self image, self-esteem, human, educational and financial resources through its collective strength."

Further, the goal / aim was formulated as being:

> "To increase the socio-economic and political status of rural women in Kutch, at home and in society, and also enhance their dignity of work and livelihood. It therefore seeks to empower women to an extent, where they are able and confident decision-making partners in development initiatives at the village, community, and regional level."

It was registered as a Trust and Society in June 1989. Its founder sponsors - JanVikas, GSHDC, and Commissioner for Women and Child Development constituted the first Board of Trustees and General Body.

By focusing on empowerment as a process as well as an outcome, KMVS's mission embodies a concept of power as energy, capacity, and potential rather than as domination. KMVS started work with the belief that empowerment of women involves the interplay of four interrelated and mutually reinforcing components: collective awareness building, capacity building and skills development; participation, greater control and decision-making power; and action to bring about gender equality. Although rural women are KMVS's main constituency they are not treated as an undifferentiated category. Rather, they are viewed as being stratified along the lines of caste, class, ethnicity, and religion. The agenda and activities of KMVS were to emerge from a mutual educational process between KMVS and rural women.

Right from the start the KMVS core team took a decision to work with national financial resources. This was articulated as a matter of principle (it does not maintain a FCRA number either). KMVS believes that the less privileged in society should access support as a right from the state and from the more privileged in society and that such an understanding will strengthen notions of basic responsibility, mutual accountabilities, and sensitivities within our society. A significant proportion of KMVS funds come from the government. It also accesses grants from private Indian trusts and other support NGOs. KMVS has tried to maintain a balanced relationship with the government. It recognises the government as an important actor in the development process and believes in the importance of dialogue, liaison, lobby, and where necessary collaboration or distancing[4]. This autonomous stance is crucial to KMVS's ability to maintain its legitimacy and credibility with its own constituencies and also to act as a pressure group in relation to the state.

[4] A clear example of this stance is KMVS's reluctance to directly implement the STEP programme for expansion and consolidation of handicraft activities and its ensuing alliance with GSHDC as the implementing body. Details are discussed in the following chapter.

Overview of the Ten-Year Journey:

The pioneering team[5] started by generating qualitative as well as quantitative base-line information on rural Kutch women through a process of participant observation. They endeavoured to familiarise themselves with the complex social reality that framed women's lives. Intense scepticism, distrust, and downright hostility on part of the community, marked initial encounters at the village level. This was partly exacerbated by social politics of "Ojhal" and "Vas" prevailing among the different communities[6]. However, the persistence of the KMVS team to engage with women and listen to what they had to say was instrumental in winning acceptance, albeit at times grudgingly. The team was also able to convince key members of the communities, both men and women, of the sincerity of their ideas. These men and women played a significant role in carving out a space for KMVS activities. KMVS also reached out to other NGOs (SEWA, CHETNA, and CEE) and launched an innovative awareness campaign regarding health, economic, and environmental rights – using the medium of posters, films, songs, and skits.

KMVS's initial forays into Kutch were among the craft rich communities of Pachcham Taluka. The strategic deployment of the issue of women embroidery workers was crucial in mobilising women as well as developing KMVS's credibility in their eyes. Further, the issue of handicrafts provided a platform to draw connections with the other economic, social, and political dimensions framing women's lives. Sushma Iyengar remarks:

> "Discussions on why they [women] had become such frenetic craft producers took them into a process of tracing the roots of the problem – the ecological degradation and ensuing effects on women – poor health and lack of female education… Status as piece-rate workers was discussed in view of their own gendered relationship with the so-called 'middlemen' who often happened to be an influential male member of the extended family… The 'middlemen' were looked at in terms of their critical function and role in the production process. If this middle-agent was to be eliminated, someone had to play his role. Could the women do that collectively?"

Such a process of conscientisation enabled women to identify their concerns. This was also successful in attracting women who were not craft producers to these mahila mandals-which were still very much in their infancy. These conversations also enabled the articulation by women regarding the importance of a space (physical as well as social) where they could overcome the local dynamics of "Vas" and "Ojhal", work as a collective and exchange ideas and experiences.

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[5] Alka Jani and Meera Goradia joined Sushma Iyengar in 1989 to embark on the process of making KMVS operational.

[6] "Vas" refers to the local notions of segregated spatial configurations in the village along community lines. These same politics also have created a space for strategic alliance building between different communities in relation to KMVS activities. These will be elaborated upon in a later section.

These meetings and discussions prepared the ground for planning out development interventions- exercises that would allow them to initiate some degree of control over their lives. Correspondingly, the immediate objective became to highlight the condition of women craft workers and assert their status as artisans. This meant working closely with GSHDC to ensure a fair market, special training to familiarise craft workers with issues involved in raw material acquisition, accessing credit, production, quality control, and marketing. Apart from focusing on handicrafts, women also rallied together to build a low cost work / meeting centres in the first ten villages of Pachcham Taluka. This had the domino effect of identifying another category of exposure and training required at the mandal level–accessing local bureaucracy to apply for land, understanding how land is classified, designing spaces, and deciding on construction material. In absence of numeracy skills, women developed an ingenious way of maintaining records of all transactions pertaining to the construction of their work-centre-through the use of different embroidery stitches in varied colours. The presence of a physical structure and space was instrumental in legitimising women's activities in their own mind as well as the community.

These activities led to recognition of the need for trained (skilled) workers at the village level-a health worker to maintain a health kit, educator to launch informal literacy classes, and workers to organise crèches[7]. The process was also successful in identifying 5-6 women who had the potential to be facilitators or leaders in each village. Efforts to consolidate the handicraft process (training needs, procuring work orders, and delivering work orders) also threw up the need for efficient and accountable structures. This led to the emergence of an intermediary tier between the mandals and KMVS that would later be formalised as the Taluka Sangathans. KMVS's early phase was marked with innovation and creativity on part of the organisers and the rural women. It was the beginning of a journey towards mutual empowerment.

KMVS: ACTIVITY PROFILE

BLOCKS: NUMBER OF ACTIVE VILLAGES

ACTIVITIES	***ABDASA***	***NAKHATRANA***	***MUNDRA***	***PACHCHAM***
Environment	5	13	13	12
SCP	52	22	43	20
Legal	25	1	25	0
Panchayat	2	3	8	2
Education	1	3	0	0
Health	28	10	1	18
Handicraft	1	12	0	12

The middle phase (1992 to 1996) of KMVS witnessed its geographical expansion through the formation of mahila mandals in other villages and blocks. At the same time it also

[7] In the initial phase mahila mandals also took on the task of organising crèches for the children of their members. Gradually, the mandal lobbied and got government sponsored anganwadis in their villages. These crèches were subsequently withdrawn.

witnessed an expansion of its agenda. Handicraft was no longer the only rallying point as issues relating to environment, health – especially women's health and legal issues started gaining eminence from women themselves. For the newly formed Sangathans it was a time of relentless activity in all these sectors as well as initial attempts to come to terms with its growing power base. For individual women it was primarily about gaining access to information and training – relating to land and water, their bodies, the reproductive cycle, government schemes and structures, and their legal rights as citizens – which had been constantly denied to them. It was a time to contribute to the community and village as a whole – alongside with men-and challenge the traditional notion of male and female spheres of activities. The enthusiasm was boundless, and according to Sushma Iyengar "there was a certain brazenness with which every opportunity was picked and converted into a medium for education and strengthening their self-worth".

KMVS's team was expanding in order to meet the growing needs of training at the local level, building linkages with other NGOs to strengthen its own specialised knowledge and action base. Sister organisations – Sahjeevan (earlier JVEC) and the regional office for Centre for Social Justice in Kutch – emerged as a response to specific needs of the area. This period also witnessed the emergence of domestic violence as a political issue. The Family Counselling Centre (henceforth FCC), which had been recently launched, began receiving complaints and enquiries and the issue of violence and women's need for physical security became a central issue for women's empowerment.

An essential ingredient missing in this phase was the critical concept of environmental mapping – women had created and embraced an alternative space but an alternative vision had yet to be articulated. Women understood the importance of information and the power it wields. However, they were not able to process this information to critically read their environment, identify and trace the probable intentions and actions of the various actors and their reaction to women's initiatives - and thus engage in strategic thinking and action. In the legal battle over land rights in Ludia, the entire mahila mandal was dragged to court on false charges of land appropriation. This was a learning experience for everyone and highlighted the need for prudence and strategizing.

The last and most recent phase (1996 – 2000) has seen the consolidation of the Taluka Sangathan's identity as an independent collective of rural women and it's increasing visibility at the grassroots. The old initiatives are being strengthened and further intensified – provision of surgical interventions relating to gynaecological needs, watershed development, introduction of the Ujjas newsletter, and introduction of a brand name "Qasab" for direct marketing of handicrafts. All the four Sangathans are actively pursuing savings/credit schemes and are inching their way to economic independence just as their members are trying to free themselves from the debt trap. The Sangathans have been further empowered through their ability to access funds through loans as well as their newfound power to disburse loans. There has also been an unprecedented show of support on part of men – especially through the Sangathan's plans and vision of environmental regeneration. Strategic issues like legal rights and how to demystify the legal system are being highlighted to help women seek solutions to their problems. Women are today more confident about their abilities to address issues like alcoholism

through anti-alcohol campaigns – which encode the potential to rupture gender relations and local power structures. Sangathan teams are actively taking on the task of mobilising new members and have emerged as the new educators in the field.

During this period KMVS was able to evolve and consolidate an organisational structure that facilitated decentralisation and devolution of power to the Sangathan. This process generated new education and information needs related to dynamics of power sharing, and issues of transparency and accountability. The Sangathans have reached a stage where their ability to identify, demand, develop, and manage developmental interventions is palpable. However, they continue to need issue based and sector specific support. Given the changing landscape, KMVS is in the process of moving away from hands-on management of the Sangathan and creating in-house resource centres – handicrafts, legal, environment, health, education, savings/credit, and panchayat and governance. These resource cells provide training inputs to the Taluka Sangathans. As a result the Taluka Samitis (elected representative body) have emerged as important focal points and the identity of the village level mahila mandal has been subsumed into the Taluka Sangathan. Another cause for concern has been the inability of educational initiatives to present a convincing case for formal literacy as opposed to informational education practices at the local level – which is changing.

At the end of its first decade, KMVS has emerged as a blend of an action-oriented grassroots movement as well as a support NGO. On one hand it is committed to reinforcing the process of empowerment through mobilisation, assertion and struggle; on the other hand it is driven by the expressed developmental and economic needs of the local people. KMVS has tried to provide structural continuity through in-house resource cells and strategic lateral networking. The various meetings and workshops with KMVS as well as the rural collectives reveal that the process of meeting community needs of income, water, healthcare, social infrastructure and education is increasingly falling on women. Women leaders in KMVS are looking at them as women's issues. Simultaneously, women are also addressing gender and social injustice issues like domestic violence, dowry, alcoholism etc. The challenge before KMVS is to creatively manage seeming tensions between women's empowerment and larger development objectives and work towards creating a genuine synergy between the two without falling into the pervasive trap of gender instrumentalism. Furthermore, KMVS is also grappling with the issue of "quality vs. quantity" – whether at this juncture it should go along with the flow and expand according to the wishes of the local people or take a decision to slow its implementation drive and focus its energies on consolidating and strengthening initiatives in member villages.

Organisational Structure - Designing For Empowerment:

KMVS's organisational aim is to reach down to the grassroots and simultaneously attempt to create enabling structures that allow for women to reach up from below. Keeping this in mind, it was proposed at the inception of KMVS that every mahila mandal participant would become a member of KMVS via its Taluka Sangathan (federation of mahila mandals), and an elected representative of the Taluka Sangathan would be elected as member of the Governing and General Body in the years to follow.

At the core of KMVS's organisational edifice is a decentralised three-tier structure where the tiers do not necessarily reflect a hierarchical ordering:

The ***first-tier*** comprises of the mahila mandals that are formed at the village level. Women come together to talk about, address their issues and participate in different activities of the Sangathan. The average size of these mandals is 30-40 members. Every mandal has a core team with some members taking on specific responsibilities – health, handicraft, savings, environment, water etc. Each mandal elects a leader called the "Agewan". Members pay an annual fee of Rupees 5. The mahila mandal provides a collective space for women to express and share their experiences, tribulations, and accomplishments with each other. It also acts as a forum for strategizing and implementation of activities in their homes, community, and the village.

The ***second-tier*** is made up of the Taluka Sangathans, which are federations of mahila mandals belonging to each Taluka with an average size of 1000 - 2000 women. The core groups of the different mandals constitute the lead group of the Sangathan and it is their role to provide necessary leadership and initiative to the Sangathan activities. Further, the members are trained in organisational leadership, which entails problem recognition, needs identification, organising /implementing programmes/activities, analyses, implementation and lobbying procedures.

A Taluka Samiti of 8-10 women in turn supports the lead group. They are selected by Sangathan members and operate from an office at the Taluka headquarters. Samiti members have designated roles according to their area of interest and expertise. KMVS's has continuously attempted to develop every Sangathan as an independent local organisation – democratically elected and self-managed. This structure enables it to act as an autonomous interface between KMVS team and the village mandals. The Taluka Sangathans have now begun to access independent grants and manage their finances (with technical help from KMVS), including income-generating schemes. Over the years the proportion of the core running costs of the Taluka Sangathan has steadily risen.

The ***third-tier*** is KMVS itself. All the four Taluka Sangathans are integrated into its structure. It acts as a large resource centre for the Sangathans' activities as also the interface between the rural women and the state, NGOs, and donor agencies. The KMVS organisational structure constitutes of the apex level governing, executive, and administrative body. Apart from the executive team, KMVS consists of 7 in-house resource units – education, health, savings/credit, legal support, craft production, natural resource management, and panchayat – that are independently co-ordinated by KMVS members. The function of these units is to provide training inputs and extend support to the Sangathans in order to enable them to plan and implement their activities independently. KMVS also assists the resource units by attaching resource organisations and persons from the district, within the state and outside, to assist in conceptualising, planning, and increasing their knowledge base. Further, KMVS also mediates the transfer of resources from the state and is responsible for the formal documentary needs of the larger organisation as well as the Sangathans. KMVS's long-term vision is to transform itself as a consolidated federated body of the local Sangathans.

The emphasis on the creation of a rural collective was embodied in the initial idea of KMVS; there was a manifest recognition that in order to be successful, women would need to access as well as receive support from GOs and NGOs. The governing body's composition reflects this perceived need and is comprised of 12 members, which include:

- 3 state officials, representing GSHDC, DRDA, and Commissioner, Women and Child, Gujarat
- 2 representatives from JanVikas
- 4 elected trustees from the different Taluka Sangathans to ensure shareholder participation, representation, and provide a space to mediate accountability.
- 3 members from KMVS – the executive secretary and the programme executives (2) and 1 representative from the KMVS worker council.

The KMVS board is thus a formal and integrated group of senior KMVS staff members, representatives of the rural collectives, and others selected for professional and strategic requirements of the organisation. In the last decade, the organisation structure has been subject to a continuous internal review every 2 years by the KMVS staff and Sangathan members. The structure was reviewed keeping in mind the current and anticipated needs of rural Kutch women as well as to ensure ongoing professional direction for KMVS. The early years were crucial for articulating KMVS's mission, building its programme, and establishing its legitimacy. After ten years the organisation needs to induct individuals with experience in financial management, banking, health, and research.

As a policy, KMVS concentrates on building local leadership – not only at the village level but also at the organisational level. The rationale behind this emphasis is not only to restrict dependency on "outside" professionals unable to make long-term commitments, but to develop local abilities and create opportunities for the emergence of a cadre of workers who are critically conscious of local realities. New staff is initiated into human resource development training with an emphasis on gender, caste, and class relations. They are made to understand the national as well as regional socio-political and economic context in which KMVS operates, followed by training on group dynamics and leadership development as well as in their areas of specialisation. Further, the staff is actively encouraged to participate in exposure trips to different NGOs – Urmul Trust and Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan, SPARC in Maharashtra, Myrada in Karnataka among others. Term workshops are also organised on relevant issues. Learning is emphasised as a continuous as well as a collective process at all levels and creativity and innovation is encouraged

In 1993 a workers council was created to review and recommend personnel policies. This was conceived as yet another step towards democratisation. The council is responsible for yearly appraisal of staff performance, assist staff in self-evaluations, trouble-shoot on personnel issues, give recommendations on pay scales, among others. Moreover, the facility of an operational Sangathan office and local kitchens as cost centres have given women ease as well as the security to be mobile in course of their work in the area. The office spaces allow for merging of the private with the public, creating a space where the rules are flexible and they can eat, sleep, and work. This might not be in keeping with

ideal notions of workspace, but is essential for the morale of a predominantly female staff.

Financial Resources:

In the last decade KMVS has been supported by government agencies and national private trusts. The first five years were financed primarily by a grant from the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) and covered the processes of awareness raising, education, and organising of women in mahila mandals and the other activities – crèches, construction of the mahila kendras. The establishment of KMVS in Bhuj was also assisted by this fund. BADP assistance was consolidated in nature and provided a space for KMVS to experiment in its initial years without the donor pressure of delivering targets. The Gujarat State Social Welfare Board supported the Family Counselling centres. The National Foundation of India (NFI) supported KMVS's educational initiatives from 1995-98. NABARD and SIDBI grants have facilitated the expansion of handicrafts as also to access production loans for agriculture. In the last three years, the Ratan Tata Trust has supported the expansion of the resource units and the Dorbaji Tata Trust has provided an institutional grant.

Funding Sources 1989-1999

FUNDING SOURCE	PERIOD	AMOUNT (in rupees)
Border Area Development Programme (BADP), Government of India.	1989-1994	3,500,000
Centre for Social Welfare Board, Government of Gujarat.	1993-1996	192,695
NABARD	1995-1999	1,636,600
National Foundation of India (NFI)	1996-1999	2,631,573
United Nation Population Fund (UNFPA)	1996-1997	630,000
SIDBI Grant Loan	1996-	900,000
Dorabji Tata Trust	1997-2000	3,500,000
Ratan Tata Trust	1997-2000	3, 334,500
Total		16,375,368

KMVS has also encouraged the Sangathans to aspire for financial sustainability, at least in some measure rather than being completely dependent on it. The savings and credit activity is geared towards income-generation and has gradually started to cover Sangathan costs. Similarly, key economic activities of the Sangathans – screen-printing in Mundra and ferro-cement unit in Pachcham – are designed to generate dividends. The Sangathans are also encouraged to establish independent linkages with funding bodies and government schemes. The larger rationale behind these efforts is to encourage self-reliance.

KMVS's success is clearly evident in its elevated standing among the rural women and in the NGO as well as the donor community. Its various programmes are held up as role

models and it constantly has had to juggle visitors from other NGOs who are keen to replicate KMVS's experiences in other parts of the country. KMVS has been forced to limit the time-period in which such trips are planned so as not to hinder the Sangathans' and its own work. The success of KMVS is intrinsically linked to its decentralised mode of working and commitment to financial transparency and self-sustainability. The emphasis is on learning, independence, and communication rather than maintaining hierarchical norms. Accountability is rooted in everyday practices of information sharing, decision-making, management, and negotiation between different shareholders. Adjustment and redefinition of tasks takes place through the interaction of organisation members rather than authoritative decrees. The consistent attempt to flatten out the decision-making structure encourages lateral communication and real participation. Strategic planning and management is used less to control resources and more to facilitate and encourage flexibility, experimentation and social learning.

Annex to Chapter 1: An overview of innovations

Handicraft Exhibition, Delhi 1989:

The handicraft exhibition in Delhi of Kutch embroidered quilts was organised to showcase the difficulties that Kutch craftswomen were facing. This was one of the first attempts by an NGO to creatively raise the issue of women craft workers disempowerment. The quilts exhibited were crafted cloth panels conceived and designed by women in their numerous workshops and represented various aspects of their daily lives – gender division of labour, impact of environmental destruction, their status as workers – and were used by women for communication and training purposes. The contingent to Delhi comprised of 34 women accompanied by 6 men acting as chaperones, and was a resounding success in creating market awareness among the workers as well as publicising the condition of the rural craftswomen to the consumers. It was the first time that the majority of the women had actually set foot outside of their own villages making the event symbolically, if not in actuality, the most significant landmark in women's struggle for a collective social space and recognition.

DWCRA Fund, 1991:
KMVS tackled the economic vulnerability of women craft workers by innovatively tapping the extant provision of DWACRA funds to create a revolving fund that would suffice as working capital and effectively bridge the gaps between availability of funds, maintain an uninterrupted production cycle, source external orders without the restricting prerequisite of a monetary advance, and reduce dependency on untimely government payments. Under the existing provisions of DWACRA a group of 15 women are granted a loan of Rupees 1000 each to promote income-generating activities. However, since the handicraft collectives are larger in size, adhering to the 15 person limit has the potential for creating divisions within the collective. Adequate measures co-ordinated with the DRDA, facilitated the transfer of funds to a group of 15 and through an internal resolution ensured the sharing of money, work, and profits among all the members. In 1993, Rs. 0.8 million worth of revolving funds were created through DWACRA and 776 women belonging to 28 groups in 3 talukas were availing financial support under this programme.

Ujjas Newsletter, 1993 and revived in 1996:
The Ujjas newsletter, the voice of the Sangathan, has its origins in a broadsheet that was conceived in 1993 at the end of a massive literacy camp by the participants themselves. Since then the newsletter has evolved from being a hand-written photocopied version to a screen-printed edition created completely by the women themselves – prepared, edited, and screen-printed. The Sangathan women have been given training in screen-printing, effectively challenging the myth of printing as a masculine task, which requires professional training. This has also further enhanced women's control and their sense of ownership. The newsletter has a vast readership and is mailed to the members and even through this mundane task of mailing, performs the symbolic task of forging women's identities as individuals.

Radio Programme, 1998:
Under the aegis of the education unit and in collaboration with the panchyat resource unit, a weekly radio programme – Kunjal Panje Kutchji - of 20 minutes has been launched by KMVS. It is in a form of a dramatised serial addressing local rural and women's issues, which highlight the experiences of women's new roles in the village panchayats. It is devised as a participatory media programme, with rural women and men providing feedback and shaping the script of the programme – through participation in the drama, song, and news-reporting. The programme is broadcast on commercial time and is financially supported by UNDP-GOI, including the cost of airtime. This is the first such experiment being undertaken by a volag in the country; KMVS is supported in this endeavour by DRISHTI Media Collective, Ahmedabad and IIM, Ahmedabad's Centre for Educational Innovation.

KMVS-PHC Collaboration, 1997-2000:
KMVS has tried to link up with the PHC Khawda to create a synergy at the local level between the state's resources and its own inclinations to ensure local access to health facilities and in the process create a local pressure group as well as a mechanism for state accountability. The linkage has been successful in putting pressure on the local PHC to regularise its functions, resources, and execution of schemes – distribution of dai kits, social security for pregnant women, and dai honorarium. This collaboration has also allowed KMVS to reclaim the space to actively run a counselling/information centre to focus on gynaecology, nutrition, maternal health, and contraception instead of being bogged down by actual service delivery. This collaboration has been instrumental in developing a larger methodology of implementation in women's health as well as primary health for the benefit of the larger community viz. the Abdasa Sangathan is on the way to initiate a similar collaboration

CHAPTER II

A Programmatic Profile

Empowerment is an elusive concept. Though it is a term that is championed by all there is yet no consensus on what it means and the corresponding strategies on how to strive for it. While acknowledging the poverty of individual households and the economic insecurity as a significant factor contributing to women's disempowerment, KMVS has extended its understanding to include the larger social and political matrix that frames women's daily lives – their subordination within the family, community, and the larger political and economic context; patriarchal kinship systems with rigid norms regarding seclusion and mobility; gender division of labour; patrilineal systems of inheritance; limited economic independence and personal autonomy; denial of education and health needs; and limited bargaining power. The list is never-ending and all the identified themes are viewed as being mutually interdependent - thus making it difficult to prioritise them. Consequently, women's disempowerment in Kutch is seen as a complex interplay of historical, cultural, social, economic, and political factors and the solution is sought through pursuing developmental objectives as well as engaging in awareness raising and organising women.

Empowerment as articulated by KMVS in 1989

- Develop the confidence to articulate problems and needs in a supportive and energising environment.
- Develop the confidence and the ability to question existing structures of suppression and oppression and the prevailing norms and the environment that govern them.
- Develop the ability to critically question and analyse the roots of oppression or repression.
- Assess, as a collective, information, training, knowledge and skills needed for decision-making and action.
- Develop the ability to act on the information – to begin with in small ways and move on as they gain in strength and confidence.
- Make informed choices regarding their lives and livelihood, self-esteem and dignity.
- Gradually develop access and control over resources - as well as decisions regarding themselves, their families, work and environment.
- Understand and use the interplay of formal tools and skills (such as literacy), non-formal learning situations (such as simulations, exposures) and opportunities to "manage" and implement decisions and activities.
- Develop and control key institutions/service mechanisms which are run by and for women, and which relate to their society at large. By this, we mean, poor women asserting their education and abilities by running service centres in their local areas, making these centres visible symbols of empowerment, validate the movement, and fuel the need for learning and living with dignity.

KMVS's methodology is premised on the collective notion of empowerment and is primarily viewed as a self-sustaining and capacity-building process. The guiding premise is that empowerment is a process that cannot be given to women - women themselves must generate it. KMVS, in its role as a catalysing agent, can merely provide women with resources/or access to resources that will enable them to become subjects of social change – to be able to exert greater control over their own lives, define the social relations they would want to live within, and devise the strategies and alliances to do just that. KMVS started with an operational definition of empowerment and a list of doable activities. In the first year, for instance, it focused on learning about the area, building rapport with rural women and creating a core team. Starting with handicraft women artisans, KMVS gradually worked towards building women's groups in the villages which are today federated as the Sangathan. Building local cadre of women workers, training women as specialists in health, education, environment regeneration, water harvesting, paraprofessional legal work, midwifery and preventive health - KMVS has tried to create an environment where women articulate their own vision of empowerment and gradually move towards it. As women gained strength and understanding, their vision of empowerment changed. Trying to shoot a moving goalpost was not easy; therefore KMVS focused on concrete goals and moved forward in an incremental manner.

The methodology adopted by KMVS is reflective of this process and is a consistent yet flexible blend of three distinct modes of action:

- First, self-management of programmes, problems, and intervention, as a method of "hands-on" education;
- Second, building autonomous organisations with rural women at different levels with "ownership" patterns inherently designed;
- Third, issue-based cadre building with specialised training – for local leaders and managers.

This methodology is evident in the various areas of intervention identified by KMVS - handicrafts, savings and credit, environment, health, legal, education, and Panchayat. The rest of this chapter is a programmatic profile of KMVS's activities, highlighting KMVS's quest to find means and ways to enhance women's efforts at the grassroots through extension of support by the different resource units-training, directing resources, and creating linkages with other key organisations. These initiatives have been central towards the creation of autonomous Taluka Sangathan.

Handicrafts:

Kutch has a rich tradition of crafts and women exhibit high levels of visual literacy and relate to forms, symbols, colour, and space in a highly evolved and innovative manner. The different communities, primarily comprising of Muslims and Dalit groups, have their unique styles of embroideries-a combination of a variety of techniques of stitches, colours, and mirror work. Traditionally these embroidered crafts were for indigenous use – for everyday-wear, home enhancement and wedding trousseau among others. Only a fraction of the households engaged in embroidery as a commercial activity. However, as indicated in the earlier chapter, with the increase in frequency of drought, embroidery has

been transformed into a full-scale commercial activity, further adding to women's existing workload.

Diversity of craft communities in Kutch					
Community	**Traditional Occupation**	**Present Occupation**	**Religion**	**Area**	**Craft**
Meghwals	Weavers & leather worker	Cattle breeding	Hindu	All areas	Banni embroidery
Ahir	Cattle-breeding	Cattle breeding & agriculture	Hindu	Bhuj, Anjar, Mandvi, Rapar, & Mundra	Ahir embroidery
Jat	Cattle breeding	Cattle breeding	Muslim	Nakhatrana, Abdasa, & Lakhpat	Jat embroider & patchwork
Mochi	Cobbler & landless labour	Small services	Hindu	Rapar, Bachau, & Anjar	Mochi embroidery
Mutwa	Cattle breeding	Cattle breeding & agriculture	Muslim	Banni	Mutwa embroidery & Chitki kuragi patchwork
Chamars	Leather worker	Cattle breeding & leather workers	Hindu	All areas	Mochi embroidery & patchwork
Rabari	Cattle breeding	Cattle breeding & agriculture	Hindu	All areas	Rabari embroidery
Darbar (Sodha)	Agriculture & land owners	Agriculture/ land owners	Hindu	All areas	Soof, Pako, Neran, & Kharek patchwork
Node	Cattle breeding & agriculture	Cattle breeding, agriculture, & Labourers	Muslim	Bhuj, Banni, & Pacham	Node embroidery & patchwork
Odheja	Cattle breeding & agriculture	Labourers & cattle breeding	Muslim	Anjar, Bhuj, Mandvi, & Mundra	Odheja embroidery
Sama	Cattle breeding	Labourers & cattle breeding	Muslim	Pacham	Pakko embroidery and patchwork
Sameja	Cattle breeding & agriculture	Labourers, agriculture & cattle breeding	Muslim	Banni, Lakhpat, Mundra, Bhuj	Pakko embroidery and patchwork
Lohana	Merchant	Merchants	Hindu	All areas	Lohana embroidery
Haleputra	Cattle breeding	Labourers & cattle breeding	Muslim	Banni	Pakko, Meran, & Mukko embroidery & patchwork
Raysiputra	Cattle breeding	Labourers & cattle breeding	Muslim	Banni	Pakko and Mukko embroidery

Men too engage in handicrafts – weaving, woodwork, leather, and metal – though these activities are not as labour and time intensive. Further, there is a distinct gender hierarchy; while men enjoy control over tools of production and direct access to market, the women are commissioned as artisans on piece rate basis, either by the male artisan or by the middlemen. Marketing and sales is largely a monopoly of the middlemen and

women are paid abysmally low prices for their embroidered crafts while the middlemen realise the value added profits and usually sell the final product with a margin of 200-300%.

In the very beginning KMVS started organising women in Pachcham around issues relating to their lack of control over handicraft production and sale. The effort was to enable women to gradually take control of the production process. KMVS entered into a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with GSHDC whereby the latter would become the main buyer of Kutchi embroidery produced by the members of the different Mahila Mandals. The GSHDC agreed to eliminate the middlemen and buy directly from KMVS. The MoU was operationalised in 1990. It was not an easy task as the initial attempts were met with stiff resistance from the district staff of GSHDC at Bhuj despite commitment from the top echelons. KMVS, facilitated by key individuals in GSHDC, impressed upon the local staff the need for such a link-up and its larger role in the socio-economic transformation of the region.

The MoU provided the vital marketing link and was crucial for KMVS in gaining the trust of the local craftswomen who started realising a real wage for their labour. It also provided the space and collaboration to organise an exhibition of Kutchi embroidered quilts in Delhi to showcase the difficulties faced by Kutchi craftswomen[8]. A signature campaign was launched to put pressure on census authorities to recognise the craftswomen's identity as bonafide workers. About 800 local artisans were enthused into signing the concerned petition.

Despite these early efforts KMVS was unable to organise women completely as it was their husbands and relatives who were acting as the middlemen. The opportunity to make a concerted attempt to eliminate the middlemen emerged in 1992. The Department of Women and Child Welfare approached KMVS for implementing STEP (Special Training and Employment Programme) in the villages in which it was working. While KMVS needed the resources that STEP had to offer, it was reluctant to take on the responsibility as it did not want to be tied up with a target-oriented scheme in the midst of an intensive, yet nascent, mobilisation and educational processes. Through a process of negotiation it was decided that STEP would be channelled and implemented through the offices of GSHDC, which was already on KMVS's board, and that the latter would be responsible for marketing the craft output. This arrangement further strengthened the original marketing link between KMVS and GSHDC and facilitated the process of mobilisation, which was bolstered by concrete work orders as well as reduction of marketing risk. Through creation of mutually supporting production and social teams at the grassroots, KMVS in turn started strengthening the production process through provision of management, marketing, design support and training and in the process create social awareness as well as improve women's status.

The STEP programme was also instrumental in the creation of Karigar Sangathan, comprising of skilled craftswomen in the different Talukas. Under the existing set-up

[8] The experience of the Handicraft Exhibition, Delhi, 1989 has been described in Annex to Chapter 1: An overview of innovations

while Mahila Mandals paid wages to women for every unit produced, GSHDC in turn paid only for acceptable products after deducting the cost of raw material supplied. Thus every reject cut into potential surplus generation of the Mahila Mandals and made them economically vulnerable. Both KMVS and GSHDC undertook a joint census in the blocks that had a rich craft tradition and segregated women according to employment level, skill levels, and income generating needs. This process was in keeping with KMVS's overarching objective of promotion of handicrafts as a viable secondary occupation and discouraged women, who were not crafts women by tradition, from participating. A facility was created for a designer, to be responsible for input of colour combinations, designs, and product range to ensure marketability. About 1,150 members in 35 villages in 3 Talukas were organised as Karigar Sangathan. The distribution of orders received from GSHDC was done on the basis of work estimation based on different skill levels and 95% of the output marketed through the GSHDC. The long-term vision behind these interventions was to engage in capacity building and to develop and enhance requisite skills. Women with lower skills were also grouped together for skill upgradation. This vision sought its concrete manifestation in the emergence of the Training-cum-production centre (TPC) in 1998.

STEP was successful in relation to its two manifest objectives - economic empowerment of women as well as awareness raising on other socio-political issues. Women started identifying themselves as a collective and reflecting on the interconnections between various aspects of their lives. They evinced interest in issues pertaining to natural resource management, literacy, health, savings and credit, and domestic violence. This development was positively correlated to their abilities to understand and control the production process independently and earn higher wages. Increased interaction with the various government agencies also gave them the self-confidence to deal with officials and effectively lobby for resources. The process also encouraged women's physical mobility through the organisation of training, camps, fairs and meetings and these fora became an innovative medium for information dissemination. Thus STEP programme therefore went far beyond income generation.

However handicraft production was still susceptible to delays in payment of wages to the artisan community because of delayed payment from GSHDC. This intensified women's economic vulnerability as they were still caught in the trap of being wage labourers as opposed to being independent entrepreneurs. KMVS addressed these limitations through the deployment of two independent and concurrent strategies.

First, it took the initiative of tapping extant provision of DWCRA funds to create a revolving fund as working capital to effectively bridge the gaps between availability of funds, maintain an uninterrupted production cycle, source external orders without the restricting prerequisite of a monetary advance, and reduce dependency on untimely government payments[9]. Under this programme, all the groups were co-ordinated by a core group that comprised of literate women from the various Mahila Mandals.

The availability of funds led to further consolidation of the production process and new

[9] DWCRA has been described in detail in Annex to Chapter 1: An overview if innovations

systems began to be introduced - regulation of raw materials usage, controlled design process, sustaining links with current and emerging markets and initiating new training programmes. Through constant involvement in training, organising exhibitions, and participating in exposure trips, women have become capable of managing the production process, often independent of KMVS's support. Overall, it has contributed towards increasing the income earning and bargaining capacity of craftswomen. These funds have also enhanced the risk-taking potential of the artisans as it permits producers to break-free of the no-risk/low profit markets of the GSHDC and actively explore alternative markets on their own terms as well as according to their own pace.

In 1996 GSHDC was in the midst of a financial crisis and subsequently STEP was discontinued. There was a cessation of supply of raw materials and a slump in demand from GSHDC. To meet the growing deficit, the Sangathan took a loan from SIDBI, which was routed through KMVS Bhuj at 14.5% rate of interest. This was used as a revolving fund in lieu of GSHDC's monetary support. The loan repayment is currently on; however, the steep rate of interest cut into the profit margins making it impossible to maximise production as well as profits. Artisans usually put a 30% margin over cost of production (including labour) - of which 14.5% goes towards interest, 7-8% goes towards administrative expenses, 3-5% goes into marketing costs, and the rest is reinvested. Despite an ever-expanding market and increase in production capacity, women have not been able to significantly enhance their income. GSHDC resumed its role as a buyer in 1998. In the interim period the Sangathan, with support from the handicraft unit, actively explored independent marketing venues. For example, exhibitions arranged by Oxfam allowed craftswomen to come in contact with other producer groups and also get greater exposure.

In the last four years, the Sangathan has started marketing under its own brand name - "Qasab", which in Kutchi means "crafting skills". The brand identity has been created through developing brochures, information tags, packaging, and basic forms of merchandising. Efforts are being made to focus on exports as well as develop a steady foreign clientele. Opening an outlet at a local hotel has also been effective in capturing the local tourist market (10% of the retail sales from this outlet is diverted to the hotel for the privilege). Efforts are also underway, through collaboration with IRFT and Artistree (the erstwhile marketing branch of O&M) to explore corporate gift markets and assist in innovative marketing strategies.

The second strategy adopted by KMVS to empower women in the production process was the establishment of the TPC for the Karigar Sangathan in Khadwa (Pachcham). This services all the four Talukas. It primarily aims to develop entrepreneurial abilities and become economically empowered. The TPC has been set up with financial assistance from NABARD after lengthy negotiations between NABARD and KMVS. It became operational in 1998 and the specific training areas identified in its mandate are – designing, in-house value added provisions, marketing and management, information dissemination, equipment and services, research and development, and accounts and finance. It is specifically oriented towards creation of a raw material and finance bank – to purchase raw material on behalf of the artisans and extend credit facilities. The coupon

based credit system is envisaged whereby women can buy the raw material in exchange of coupons. Subsequently the amount is deducted from the sale price of their finished goods. The introduction of such a system combined with reinvestment of profits (certain percentages) should lead to a self-managed and self-financed credit banking system.

The Karigar Sangathan in Pachcham, Mundra, and Nakhatrana are being assisted by the TPC and it is estimated that each member would earn an average income of Rupees 500-600 per month for a 4-hour work schedule, 10 months a year. The expanding market as well as emergence of niche marketing would involve further decentralisation of artisans into smaller producer groups based on skills and market demands for their product. This, it is believed, would enable them to assert their independent identities and capture specific niche markets. These small groups would however remain attached to the Karigar Sangathan for their brand name, services, infrastructure facilities and value addition to their projects. Through the TPC, KMVS is also planning to expand and provide design and marketing inputs to male artisans so as to enable them to produce as entrepreneurs rather than operate as middlemen. A feasibility study of leather craft in Banni-Pachham area has been conducted to test the viability of such an intervention. This study is presently being used by the Government of Gujarat to plan for the leather sector in Kutch. The TPC has become a symbol of pride for the local community; it also showcases the new ferro-cement technology, which is used in its construction. It is also fast becoming a sales outlet despite some pending construction for lack of finances.

Handicraft has been pivotal to KMVS's growth in the last decade and yet for some reasons has also been peripheral in contributing to the organisation's vision of empowerment. The journey has not been easy or direct. The resource unit has often found itself caught at the crossroads of competing demands – on one hand responding to market imperatives to maintain the viability of handicraft production and on the other hand to reinforce the process of conscientisation and mobilisation at the grassroots. The former requires a management approach to fully tap the income-earning potential to ensure success while the latter requires community engagement and interaction. Unlike other initiatives like environment, handicrafts do not require the same kind of collective engagement and yet because of its very nature is draining of women's energy, time, and resources. The heterogeneity of women often results in the expression of conflicting needs – where some women prefer to elevate handicraft production to an art form (this is in keeping with KMVS's larger philosophy) and yet there are women who want to participate in handicraft production and elevate it to the status of a primary source of income.

Lastly, the resource unit has to mediate the tightrope between increasing Sangathans' dependency on itself or letting go too soon with disastrous consequences. The technical nature of support being extended by the resource unit – management, marketing, and design support – necessarily implies that decisions regarding these areas are under the control of the unit rather than the Sangathan. On the other hand to delegate these responsibilities to the Sangathan and expect it to function effectively without technical support is not a suitable alternative. These main issues are further obfuscated by logistical

issues relating to multiplicity of groups, crafts, raw materials, seasonality of labour and production, and the geographical spread of villages in Kutch.

Currently, the handicraft unit is at a stage where it is able to maintain a balance between the needs of maintaining commercial viability, preserving tradition as well as ensuring market quality in products, and facilitating confidence and capability-building of individual women as well as the Sangathan. The balance, KMVS acknowledges is tenuous and cannot be sustained in the process of replication. Presently, the resource unit is also engaged in lateral expansion. Apart from providing support to the Karigar Sangathans, the resource unit has also initiated a process whereby the unit can extend assistance to other craft groups in the region to ensure better management, marketing, or organising in that group. Till date, the unit has imparted training to artisans linked to Kalaraksha and Vivek Gram Udyog. The unit has also supported Shilpgram, Dastakar project, and Bhujodi weavers.

Savings And Credit[10]

Upto 1993, discussions in the Sangathan often centred on issues of exploitation in relation to the local moneylenders - Sahukars and the Mahajans-on whom households are forced to rely on for cash during emergencies. Given the economic insecurity inherent in a drought economy Kutchi households were finding themselves being inexorably sucked into indebtedness. These discussions revealed that women were interested in starting a savings and credit scheme but were hesitant to take the initiative to save and manage their personal income because they felt they lacked the adequate skills. After more discussions with the KMVS team, one Mahila Mandal of Nakhatrana Taluka took the initiative to launch a pilot savings scheme that would meet the needs of the local women. After this six month experimental phase, KMVS arranged exposure trips for some key members to different parts of India to familiarise them with some of the successful ventures in this field. These training trips and the experiences of the pilot program culminated in developing guidelines for a KMVS's savings and credit venture:

- A savings group must not wait beyond three months before it initiates lending since it is the process of lending, not passive saving that sustains and motivates the group. A lending process maintains activity and increases the ability to take risk. For instance in the pilot phase the non-lending period stretched to 8 months and this subsequently created a low morale. The problem that the venture had sought to address, high rates of interest, still persisted and ultimately resulted in increasing dissatisfaction and suspicion among the members.
- Limiting savings and lending to the village level invariably limits the scale and also the availability of funds. This also entails lengthy gestation period before it can adequately meet the loan needs of the village. In order to avoid this, KMVS structured its programme in a way such that independent village groups pool their savings together at the Taluka level and function like a bank and not just village level savings and credit-activity. This approach was consistent with KMVS overall

[10] The following discussion is primarily based on a KMVS document – "Notes on Savings and Credit "Banking" Programme of KMVS.

empowerment strategy of encouraging village groups to federate and work together as a Taluka Sangathan.

- During study tours women observed that several well-run S&C groups were managed by professional NGO staff – leading to greater dependency and defeating the very purpose of the creation of the group. On the other hand those groups that were self-managed were often small and basic, and as a consequence unable to leverage their money well. The question was how both these extreme situations could be avoided.
- Women also observed that as savings and credit groups stabilised and acquired a positive reputation, banks were in a hurry to refinance them – regardless of their readiness. They also observed that without systematic exposure and training, group leaders were not in a position to negotiate with bank officials. Often the narrow vested interests of the banks and their desire to meet certain targets leads to such pressure. The importance of developing negotiating skills and also a deeper understanding of the larger lending environment was identified as a priority.

Norms, rules and procedures agreed upon by the Sangathans

- Every village Mahila Mandal collects its monthly savings and bring it to the Sangathan office for depositing it in a common pool on a fixed banking day. They fill out village savings deposit form and submit a copy to the Sangathan office.
- Each group constitutes 30-35 members and sometimes more. When the number exceeds 60-75 women, they split into two savings groups within a village for their monthly management. They continue to be part of one Mahila Mandal.
- Each village decides they own savings norms – however all of them have agreed on a minimum savings of Rs.10 per month. Women can access loan of a maximum of ten times the value of their savings.
- Credit needs of women are discussed, scrutinised and forwarded to the Sangathan in monthly meetings in each village. 5 women to stand guarantee for each loan, thereby ensuring regular monitoring of repayments as well as peer group pressure.
- The Sangathan bank is managed by the Taluka Samiti, which in turn is comprised of women nominated by the Mahila Mandal. During monthly meetings the morning is devoted to collection of savings and the afternoon for processing loan applications. These meetings reinforce a culture of discipline, routine payments and staff accountability.
- Women earn a 6% interest on deposits. This is comparable to existing interest rates in banks. The lending rate is 24-36% annually as opposed to 120-200% being charged by local moneylenders.
- Interest on production loan has now been reduced to 18-24%.
- The repayment schedule for loans is 6 months.
- Records are maintained on savings deposits, loan applications, pass books to indicate deposit, withdrawals and interests, cash books, repayment forms, ledgers of individual women and villages.
- In case of death of a member, the savings would be deposited in the name of her surviving daughter or child.
- A member is eligible to borrow after 6 months of consistent saving. In the first year she can take a loan up to Rs. 500 only.

In 1994, the Pachcham and Abdasa Sangathan took the first initiative to begin their savings and credit programme. 8 villages opted to take the responsibility to start the

activity, mobilise women and extend it. Mundra and Nakhatrana followed suit and by the beginning of 1995 almost all Sangathan members came on board. The Savings and Credit programme thus started in 70 villages. The basic features of this process of mobilisation were:

- Through an intensive process of meetings and training workshops at the village and Taluka Samiti levels it was agreed that the Mahila Mandals would come together at the Taluka level for this activity, and continue to maintain their village level identity.
- The programme was to be initiated and managed by the Sangathan with support from KMVS resource unit. Recognising inadequate management skills at the Taluka level, it was agreed that the Mahila Mandals would identify women for training.
- The early birds – the forerunners – drafted the rules and regulations based on their experience. These rules were discussed and adapted as the programme expanded. This was made possible because in the initial phase KMVS resource unit conducted intensive management, attitude, and leadership training. These villages in turn have acted as role models and inspired other women to do the same.
- The Sangathan retained the initiative for this programme and KMVS resource unit provided intensive training and handholding support at all stages. They also provided logistical support to reach out to interior villages. The presence of the Taluka Samiti office provided a vital link for support and training. This, perhaps more than anything else, resulted in a sense of ownership among Sangathan members and the women leaders.

In the following years the activity spread to 129 villages. New structures and norms were developed in response to the increased money flows as well as demands of women. The Taluka Samiti now has two sub-units:

i. "Sahiyars" - village level facilitators and mobilizers; and
ii. "Managers" who maintain records, finances and liaison with the banks.

The finances are also segregated in to two accounts:

i. The fund account from which lending takes place – this is essentially comprised of the savings of women; and
ii. Repayment and income account which comprises of the interest received by the Sangathan on loans taken, loan fee, and other fees.

This segregation was undertaken to ensure transparency on the one hand and to direct the income account funds towards securing sustainability of the Sangathan. Honorariums to Sahiyars are paid from this account. Similarly they also contribute to administrative costs and investment in developmental activity agreed upon as a collective. The Mahila Mandal "Agewan" is paid a yearly dividend for record keeping and liaison work between villages and Taluka. The Sangathans report that they have been able to cover their own running costs (honorarium and dividends). Further, Pachcham and Abdasa contribute 20% of the administrative costs and have also been assisted by a grant from the Ministry of Rural Development and the handicrafts unit. Abdasa has also been successful in covering the costs of a visiting gynaecologist while Mundra has been able to cover the costs of the anti-alcohol rally and sammelan.

In the early years the Sangathan had taken a decision to bring out a newsletter on a pilot basis – Bachat Patrika. On completion of the pilot phase they agreed to undertake a study to assess and fine-tune the concept and processes. A team of two literate women were entrusted with the task of preparing the monthly newsletter with help from the education resource unit. The newsletter was seen as a tool to access relevant information, foster transparency regarding the SCP and in the process cultivate a sense of belonging and ownership. However this broadsheet was discontinued due to logistical problems. They are planning to revive it in collaboration with the UJJAS documentation cell.

The Sangathans have now reached out to banks. This was done when the members understood the dynamics of accessing a bank loan for lending to their members. They gained experience and confidence after they managed Rs 5 lakh loan from JVEC. This loan was arranged by KMVS as a training and capacity building initiative and the Sangathan used it to meet the shortfall in their credit needs. The entire transaction was simulated on the lines of a bank transaction. When the women were ready to reach out to banks, SCP resource unit assisted the Sangathans in credit need assessment, negotiation with banks and training the Taluka Samiti to formulate the credit proposal. In 1998, Sangathan negotiated loans worth Rs. 16,70,000. As a result, the Sangathan's ability to lend has gone up from Rupees 15,000 to Rupees 45,000 per month in one year. This has been augmented by an increase in its own savings and income from increased lending. Subsequently the Sangathan has supported 23 households to undertake entrepreneurial activities in order to strengthen traditional activities and consolidate household income. The SCP resource unit plays an active monitoring and handholding role. It also trains women leaders in assessment of economic projects and review them in the larger context of KMVS's approach to empowerment and development. KMVS has developed a computerised MIS system and Sangathan leaders are also being trained to manage and use this database.

This experience has demonstrated that there is a tremendous demand for credit and financial services in the region. The Sangathan dispenses short-term consumption loans as well as long-term production loans. In the initial years the consumption loans were 80-90% while production loans were only 10-20%. However, with the stabilisation of the banks and fund flows and accompanied by a almost 100% repayment rate, production loans have increased to 50-60% while proportion of consumption loans are gradually come down. This could also be interpreted as a fair indicator of improvement in the economic position of households to cope with everyday emergencies. Further, the presence of SCP has indirectly reduced the interest rates charged by local moneylenders. The emphases on low transaction costs, self-discipline, and flexibility of the system (as opposed to a uniform delivery model) could partly explain the success the SCP. For example a member had taken out a loan to buy cattle, which was subsequently lost in the cyclone of 1998. Her loan repayment package was modified and she now continues to repay the loan regularly and has also purchased new cattle through the relief money she received from the government.

The handicraft programme and the SCP initiative have contributed to the growing credibility and acceptance of KMVS and the Sangathans among the community and the

government. The SCP has been visited by several women's organisation from across the country, so much so, that KMVS has had to restrict the study tours during the winter months. Constant flow of visitors was distracting the resource unit and the Sangathan. The future plans for the SCP include linking up with social security schemes for medical and life insurance, funding community development, and accessing developmental services.

Women's health and reproductive health:

Any holistic trajectory of rural women's empowerment has to engage with their health and physical wellbeing. The "body", especially for the poor and the marginal, is defined by the politics of labour and is a very significant form of social and economic capital that defines their access to societal resources. Further, specifically for women, the body in its corporeal form embodies the inextricable social linkage between reproduction (biological as well as social) and production. A healthy body is a necessary condition for women's empowerment. Therefore women need to be able to concretely address their concerns regarding their own health as well as their family and community. KMVS has played an instrumental role in facilitating their efforts to do so.

In 1991, women in the newly emerging Sangathan identified health as an issue of collective concern. Unexpected illness or death in a family of a labouring adult was often identified as a prime factor responsible for decreasing the household's risk taking abilities and increasing its economic vulnerability. The lack of an adequate health infrastructure at the village level was glaringly obvious to any observer and it came as no surprise that the burden of this absence was disproportionately being borne by women in their multiple roles as mothers, caregivers, and workers. The health vulnerability of households is defined by the extant political ecology of the region marked by frequent drought and lack of potable water. The common health problems identified in the region are malnourishment, tuberculosis, malarial epidemics, skin ailments, gynaecological ailments and birth abnormalities. For women this has been further intensified by the prevailing social norms regarding gender divisions of labour, mobility and space for articulation of women's reproductive health issues within the larger social and family norms. The consequences are clearly observable in increasing eye and back problems due to intense craft work, anaemia, maternal morbidity, prolapsed uterus, pelvic inflammatory disease, reproductive tract infections, high infant mortality rates (the reported IMR of Kutch is 89/1000), and infertility.

KMVS interventions in health have been a combination of awareness raising on health issues, creation of a cadre of local health workers and training of local midwives - dai. Simultaneously, KMVS tried to encourage women to take the initiative and play a lead role in creating an informed health lobby at the Taluka level in order to demand services from the government clinics and hospitals. The focus was on visible reduction in IMR, maternal morbidity and health expenditure. Health surveys were done in the Talukas to ascertain health needs. These surveys lead to concrete reproductive health initiatives in Abdasa and Pachcham.

General information is imparted through community fairs, maternal clinics run by trained dais and health workers on a variety of issues – contraception, birth control and family size; basic children's ailments; child delivery and post-natal care. Emphasis is placed on both young men and women to become aware of their reproductive systems, deconstruct popular myths (male sterilisation causes impotency) and educate them safe methods of contraception. Adolescent girls are also involved through Arogya Shibirs (health education fairs). The adolescent education programme includes special curriculum on primary healthcare, nutrition, and reproductive health.

The health resource unit is actively involved in creating a cadre of village level health workers as well reviving the traditional birth attendants (dai) through organised capacity building programmes. A health kit is maintained in all the Sangathan villages and stocks essential medicines that take care of day-to-day ailments of men, women, and children. The village health worker manages this kit. The health kit has been very integral to the Mahila Mandal quest for legitimacy in the community.

In Pachcham the Sangathan is running a self-managed maternal clinics, which disseminate information on reproductive health as well as offer basic health services. Given that the nearest gynaecologist is 70 kilometres away in Bhuj, Pachcham Sangathan has taken the initiative to organise a gynaecologist to visit the Taluka at least twice a month to attend to patients and interact with health workers and local dais. Studies indicate that people are willing to pay for services and that these clinics can become self-reliant.

Despite limitations of these clinics, especially in complicated cases, they have emerged as a lifeline for women. They have given a space for women to legitimately articulate their health needs and seek help. Several innovative linkages have also marked the health initiative. A few dai representatives along with health team members were recently in Tata Memorial Hospital (Mumbai) to learn about women related cancer. This was made possible by collaboration between KMVS and a charitable trust based in Mandvi – the Bhojay Saryodaya Trust. To ensure maximum impact of such an exposure, the learning has been further disseminated to other dais in the different villages. Diagnostic camps, organised by the trust, assisted by the dais have been successful in identifying vulnerable cases.

Training traditional birth attendants – Dai

Dai training has been central to KMVS's health resource unit's identity as its benefits are most tangible in a region characterised by high rates of maternal morbidity as well as infant mortality. The training is imparted to interested women who have traditionally been birth attendants as well as women who were interested in receiving this training. The training is not viewed as a one-time input. Efforts are made to ensure a continuous process of training and this is a critical blend of traditional and modern methods, incorporates a holistic perspective on reproductive health. It is updated regularly. The education unit has developed the training curriculum after intensive interaction with trained dai and specialists:

- Body mapping
- Male/Female reproduction
- Menstrual cycle
- Nutrition during pregnancy
- Preparations for pregnancy
- Pre-natal and ante-natal care
- Post-natal processes
- Use of safe delivery kits
- High risk pregnancies
- Immunisation
- Evaluating and changing practices of dais

The training is provided by the health resource unit and is supplemented by inputs provided by a local gynaecologist in Bhuj. Regular gynaecological camps also organised by the Sangathan to provide a forum for continuing education and training of dais. They are complemented by exposure tours to as well as regular attendance in programmes organised by SEWA, Jhagaria and CHETNA, Ahmedabad. With the operationalisation of the Sangathan-PHC link, dais are encouraged to work closely with government ANMs to ensure safe delivery for all mothers. In the past year 1998-1999, 30 women from Pachcham and 36 from Abdasa have undergone the reproductive health and delivery care training.

Another significant objective of these health interventions has been to create an empowered and informed health lobby. Sangathan women are trained to independently liaise with the local and district health service providers to pressurise the PHC to perform its mandated duties – immunisation and maternal and child health among others. Khadwa, in Pachcham, has been a witness to an interesting and effective collaboration with the local PHC. The collaboration is based on the belief that it is wasteful to replicate services. Since the government machinery, with its extensive resource base is already in place, collaboration with KMVS can ensure community participation and also create a system of local accountability. The linkage has been successful in putting pressure on the local PHC to regularise its services, including distribution of safe delivery kits, social security for pregnant women, and dai honorarium. This collaboration, it is believed, will also allow KMVS to reclaim the space to actively run a counselling and information centre instead of being bogged down by actual service delivery. KMVS and the Sangathan are planning to replicate this model on a wider scale in Kutch.

Collaborative programme in Khawda PHC, Pachcham

A survey carried out in 1996 in Pachcham revealed the absence of reliable basic healthcare services in the Taluka. The local PHC was ineffective. Poor infrastructure, lack of motivation and discipline, high rate of absenteeism, inadequate training of workers and imposition of illegal fee for services contributed to the dismal situation. Given this scenario, health workers in the Sangathan were called upon to handle situations and demands that went beyond their technical capabilities. After all they were trained more as preventive and promotive workers. It was in this context that KMVS devised a strategy to link up with the PHC in Khawda to build bridges between government resources and the people. They were also interested in creating a local pressure group. Fortunately the government was in the process of launching the revamped Reproductive & Child Health programme. This programme promoted community participation, and collaboration with voluntary organisations and women's groups, thus creating space for collaboration. A co-ordination meeting was arranged between the DDO, DHO, KMVS, and Pachcham Sangathan to work out the feasibility and logistics of this collaboration.

- Immunisation drives every month by a team comprising of ANMs, male multiple workers and KMVS health team to ensure local participation. The PHC would provide the vehicle. The ANM will also provide ANC services.
- The Khawda PHC will arrange 3-month supply of delivery kits and they will be distributed to the dais during monthly meetings.
- KMVS and the PHC would computerise their records and registrations system. A computer programme was developed to generate list of children for monthly immunisation and women for ANC services.
- PHC nurses to participate in health training along with the dais – local and outside Kutch.
- PHC will be provided with stethoscopes, BP instruments, urine sticks, and paper to check haemoglobin count - to facilitate ANC services. A supply of essential medicines and vitamins would also be maintained for expectant mothers.
- Trained dais will be paid honorarium to ensure safe delivery and also fill out registration card and submit it to the authorities.
- New mothers would receive their compensation on a monthly basis. The dai will provide information on eligible women to PHC staff during the monthly meetings.
- KMVS will continue to pay for the visiting gynaecologist and the PHC nurse will assist her – thereby improving her skills and understanding.
- PHC nurse will assist KMVS in the dai programme – thereby affirming their leadership and management responsibilities.

The collaboration has been successful due to the commitment of the DDO, DHO, and the KMVS staff. According to Dr. Gambhir Singh – the PHC Medical officer - the collaboration has been beneficial, as it has enhanced information dissemination of available services and vaccination acceptance. The local dai has become an important conduit and as a group contributes 80-90% towards the success of the collaboration. Further, the collaboration has made the government service providers more accountable. However, it still lacks infrastructure to deal with complicated cases. Since our visit in March 2000, Dr Gambhir Singh has been transferred.

The health unit is in the process of developing and executing a sustainable reproductive health care system with the Sangathan. It is also experimenting with indigenous systems of medicine with a view to tap the potential of traditional knowledge and skills for preventive and promotive health. This, it is hoped, could become an inexpensive

alternative for common ailments. To this end, it has initiated comprehensive documentation of traditional medicinal plants and is also working on an experimental herbal health project for gynaecological problems.

The survey undertaken in Pachcham provides a context as well as concrete data for the ensuing linkage between the Sangathans and PHCs. The household survey revealed that reproductive health is an area of concern. Growing confidence in the health workers and greater awareness among the people is also evident. The survey also showed positive change in attitude among men towards women's health. The resource unit is looking forward to replicate the PHC collaboration in the remaining Talukas and introduce health insurance programme that is linked to women's savings schemes. It is also sensitive to the fact that that preventive health training needs to be emphasised along with curative and that the current focus on reproductive health should not be allowed to become its Achilles' heel – the need to integrate it with a larger focus on primary health for all should be the overarching objective.

While the health programme has been taken up in all the four Talukas – Pachcham, Nakhatrana, Mundra, and Abdasa – it is at different levels. Pachcham, as is evident from the narrative above, has emerged as the most active health programme. Recurrent funding shortfalls and high turnover of senior level trained staff has hampered growth. One of the problems with a health delivery programme is the need for trained technical professionals – which remains a problem.

Environment:

The drought prone economy of Kutch and the inevitable dependency on government-sponsored relief has meant that ecological regeneration is central to women's empowerment in the region. This was recognised by KMVS as early as 1989. Subsequent dialogue with Jan Vikas facilitated the emergence of Jan Vikas Ecology Cell (JVEC, which now functions under the name Sahjeevan) as an eco-technological support organisation in Kutch in 1991. The history of environmental initiatives in the region in the past decade bear testimony to the symbiotic endeavours of both KMVS and JVEC towards regeneration of natural resources through decentralised and self-managed village institutions – where women and men work in partnership and in an atmosphere of equality. This linkage has been a continuous learning experience for both the organisations and is crucial in defining their legitimacy within the communities they work in. Hence any history of KMVS's work in environment is necessarily that of Sahjeevan and vice-versa. In the initial years collaboration between Sahjeevan and KMVS was maintained through exchange of staff (through an institutionalised mechanism of reciprocal deputations) and recently KMVS has facilitated the merging of its environmental unit with Sahjeevan.

The methodology of environmental initiatives is primarily rooted in instilling local confidence in the use of natural resources along productive and sustainable lines and building self-reliance of villages in the three basic areas – food, fodder, and water. It is also about asserting the relevance as well as importance of local knowledge as a keystone issue of sustainability and developing an action research methodology to seek local

solutions to environmental problems (Ramaswamy, 1996). A constant emphasis is placed on strategizing for women's participation in natural resource management through new roles and opportunities, creation of structures that allow women to control decision-making, as well as provide on the job skill training so as to bring about a qualitative change in their lives and status-in the family as well as the larger community. And, through the above process, support the development of a trained eco-cadre of men and women at the village who have the confidence to forge ahead towards a sustainable future.

JVEC initiated its pilot phase with watershed development schemes in two villages - Khari in Pachcham and Laiyari in Nakhatrana – to educate itself about the varied ecological systems of the region as well as understand men and women's concerns regarding their natural resources. The dominant community in Khari are the Ahir and their mainstay is dryland farming, while among the Jats of Laiyari, animal husbandry and its connection to the environment is a more pressing concern. The work was implemented as a partnership between the Mahila Mandals (actually it was mandated that it should be the unit of development), JVEC, KMVS, and the entire village community; the thrust was on better management and regeneration of extant natural resources rather than purely technical interventions. Along with the village experts, JVEC studied the geology of the villages and identified the salinity patterns and suitable water harvesting technologies – earthen dams, check dams, silt traps, gully plugs, contour bunds, and percolation dams. An Eco-fund, financed by SDC and channelled through JVEC, was instituted to enable the Mahila Mandals to develop their own programmes according to their needs and interests. It had two components – land development planning and per woman household planning. Further it was stipulated that the fund could be utilised only against 75% of the funds raised from existing government schemes. This ensured providing a "leverage to women to develop bargaining power, provide scope for experimentation, and furnish seed money to mobilise government funds" (Ramaswamy 1996).

There have been general and tangible benefits of these watershed developments in these villages. It has increased the availability of drinking water through the recharging of water in the drinking water tanks (talab), thereby reducing women's workload. The recharging of water through percolation tanks has increased the water table of farmlands and enabled farmers to have a successful harvest of at least one crop – wheat and isabgol in Layari. There has been a subsequent rise in prosperity levels and this is visible in reduced migration from the villages. These developments have also generated interest among other village folk to make a transition from their tedious dependency on handicrafts towards sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry. Most significantly, it has raised their awareness of ecological issues and given them confidence that they are capable of changing their environment. It has led to the emergence of new institutions at the village level – the water Samiti and the watershed Samiti – in which both men and women are being encouraged to develop multiple skills and work in tandem with each other for a larger good. The successful demonstrations have also generated considerable interest in the region and more and more villages are keen on learning natural resource management skills.

Development of an intensive training programme on " women and natural resources" is integral to KMVS's long-term goal of enabling rural women to independently design, manage and implement natural resource conservation. The training comprises of 7 modules that cover a wide variety of inter-related themes – women and nature, small technologies, understanding maps, using revenue maps, drinking water issues and alternatives, and soil and water conservation. Follow-up sessions are organised to provide a forum for discussing the major ecological concerns of each participant village in order to determine the needs and priorities of Sangathan women. The women then carry out planning exercises at the village for different projects and these exercises provide the basis for actual implementation. The Sangathan and the resource units collaborate to formulate the larger proposal, concretise the plan, prepare the budget proposals to receive the sanctions from JVEC and the DRDA.

In mid 1996, KMVS and JVEC hosted an environmental fair, which was attended by over 2000 women. Information on environmental regeneration activities achieved under women's leadership was disseminated through the fair. Experienced Sangathan women demonstrated appropriate technology, explained concepts and presented themselves as credible and legitimate role models. The fair contributed towards the demystification of technology and science and showcased the relevance of local knowledge.

The environment fair in Khawda revealed the need to concentrate on irrigation dams and dryland farming. 4 villages were identified as prospective sites – Jamkunaria, Tuga, Dador, and Uthangadi. Exposures were organized to Rajasthan and Maharashtra and decisions were taken to identify task teams for implementation, framing rules and regulations and organising regular meetings for progress monitoring. It was proposed that beneficiaries would contribute 5% of total expenses as "shramdan". In addition they would also commit of Rs 1000 per irrigated acre to the cooperative society account. The user groups would be registered under co-operative societies act as Participatory Irrigation Management Systems - PIMS. An environment team was formed in Nakhatrana and Pachcham to oversee and assist the Taluka Samiti.

Studies and experiments are also conducted according to the need of the programme or to establish new programmes, namely: rainfall monitoring, geological studies, bio-mass resources, herd and milk management, herbal bio-diversity, Dador forestry experiment, and organic farming. KMVS alongside Sahjeevan has joined the GIAN network promoted by IIM, Ahmedabad. Horticultural trials have been undertaken with 3 farmers in Khari and later expanded to 10 farmers in 5 villages to try farming with limited water inputs. Exposures have been organised to other organic farms in the country to generate interest among the local farmers. Farm-bunding is encouraged and studies reveal that income on bunded farms is 66% more than that of non-bunded farms. The larger environment of Kutch – salt works, betonote mining, effects of industrialisation on fisheries, coastal marine eco system study – is also the new thrust of the environment programme through the FPIK (see Chapter IV for details on FPIK).

The Khari and Luddia experience, its mediation through social tensions and partly circumscribed by natural phenomenon, highlighted for KMVS and Sahjeevan that natural

resources management should be gradual and progressive so as to create preparedness among the women. Otherwise it could end up being counter-productive to women's empowerment. An understanding was emerging among the workers that KMVS needed to start with small technologies relating to drinking water, wasteland development and small irrigation dams before taking up watershed projects. There is a growing demand for small-scale household technologies, before the larger projects, which require more time, resources, overshadow the demand and where generally the benefits are collective. These small projects have a direct impact on women's work, are easily implemented by the village, while the Taluka Samiti can extend financial support and monitoring. The programme has been expanded to include benefits for individual members and households - toilets, gobargas plants, smokeless chullah, compost pits and kitchen gardens among others. Pachcham Sangathan has initiated two experiments with Sahjeevan – sericulture (cultivation of silkworms which live of castor) and redesigning the smokeless chullah to fit into *kutcha* houses. The unit is thinking of creating a separate cell, which can focus on useful small initiatives without being hindered by the imperatives of larger projects.

Environment Activities

Activities	Pachcham	Nakhatrana	Mundra
Smokeless Chullahs		200	150
Toilet/Bath		35	
Farm bunds	18	11	
Gobargas			7
Demo farm	Khawda	Dador	

Irrigation Dams

Village	Taluka	Approx. Cost(Rs.)	Irrigated Land (Acres)	HH benefited
Jankunariya	Bhuj	8,80,000	70	20
Tuga	Bhuj	14,20,000	200	50
Dador	Nakhatrana	24,85,000	200	33
Uthangadi	Nakhatrana	19,04,000	175	14
Total		66,89,000	645	117

The environment programme showcases the trajectory in the transition from women's empowerment to that of their larger community. It has challenged the traditional gender divisions of labour and yet transformed the local perception of KMVS as no longer being an organisation working only on women's issues. The integration of men in the Sangathan's plans and vision has been made possible through the environment programme. This has initiated a "constructive, creative, and credible dialogue between men and women". There is an emerging social sensibility and dialogue that an understanding of each other's interests and needs is essential and should not be reduced to a mere ritualistic gesture to ensure the benefits of natural resource management. The visible success of Khari village watershed has become a role model in the district for equal men-woman partnership in watershed management. It highlights the need for women's equal participation and decision-making in the ongoing watersheds in the district; when it was initiated was the first to encourage women's active participation in the process. Consequently, KMVS and Sahjeevan are receiving innumerable requests to train social workers from other organisations in natural resource conservation and management. Efforts are also underway to plan and assess credit needs for agriculture

and animal husbandry, and to link it with the Sangathan's SCP. The environment unit however, continues to be limited in its ability to support implementation on a bigger scale. The reason being that if it is women themselves learning to implement and control the programme; it has to keep pace with their capacity.

Education:

Education for KMVS, in essence, is the process that enables women to gain access to information, develop cognitive skills, critically analyse and process information, develop confidence to use that information to take decisions in their personal lives and as a community, and above all create a thirst for knowledge. This understanding was not there in the beginning and has developed over the years within the emerging contexts of local women's needs and interests. Education as an input began simultaneously with the initial organising and mobilising efforts of KMVS and the emerging Mahila Mandals were actively embedded in the processes of conscientisation and self-management.

KMVS introduced structured literacy classes, based on curriculum of words and concepts with which women identified in Pachcham and Mundra in 1989-90. After functioning for a year or so the efforts petered out because literacy was not a priority among women. An effort was made to revive the initiative in 1992 through the hosting of an extended literacy camp, which sought to convince women regarding the significance of literacy in their lives and its instrumental value. Professional inputs were sought to train would-be teachers and facilitators in innovative arts of teaching and information dissemination. The camp made it possible for the literacy classes to resume and several women, enthused by the success of the camp, wanted to bring out a newsletter "Ujjas" to keep abreast of their activities. The euphoria was short-lived and interest in literacy classes waned. Paucity of trained teachers, non-availability of experienced people to steer the literacy programme and problems related to structure and content of adult literacy intensified. KMVS decided to place adult literacy classes and camps on hold.

While the literacy programme went into hibernation, the process itself had several positive spin-offs. The core team of KMVS was able to identify key women leaders in the villages who have since grown with KMVS and today occupy positions of leadership in the Sangathans. Another outcome was the interest it generated among young girls who often accompanied their mothers to these classes. They were also fast learners – leading to the articulation, albeit limited, of the need for educating their adolescent daughters. However, while this opportunity was acknowledged way back in 1992, educational activities for adolescent girls were not taken up as a concrete activity at that time (it was picked up in 1996). Nevertheless, KMVS continued to explore ways and means to initiate meaningful educational activities for adult women and also revive the newsletter. It was in this context that in 1994 KMVS linked up with Nirantar, a Delhi-based support NGO specialising in education, to develop a primer (Kutch Ni Kalam) and revive Ujjas. The main focus of the KMVS-Nirantar link was to develop locally relevant and meaningful curriculum for adult women, train a group of Sangathan women to bring out the newsletter and initiate training of teachers who were working with Sangathan women leaders in the Taluka office. Since literacy was not a priority, efforts had to be made to create and identify a niche for educational activities in relation to KMVS's overall

trajectory of work. Some of the activities initiated were creation of educational and training material that are gender-sensitive and reflect local culture. Training of resource unit workers to innovatively use primers in their ongoing work was a positive outcome of this collaboration.

Education, literacy and empowerment

Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan's experience is illustrative of the struggle between empowerment and 'real life education' and literacy. The first phase of its work with rural women in Gujarat involved asserting and highlighting the collective identity of women as artisans, understanding linkages with the market and creating a network of women's groups. Building leadership skills, self-esteem and self-confidence was a painstaking process. Ensuring proper remuneration for the work of women artisans paid rich dividends. Creating institutional linkages, structures and accountability of the organisation to its members was taken up as a priority. The second phase focused on formation of an identity and education was information based. Women sought information on a range of issues- understanding the body, reproductive health, laws, government schemes, water harvesting systems and so on. Women were able to identify with larger social and developmental issues. They also organised themselves to address domestic violence.

The third phase has been one of consolidating the identity of the federation of women's groups as a body controlled and managed by women themselves. Effective decentralisation has been a truly empowering experience. As Sushma Iyengar puts it:- "Ddecentralisation has spawned new educational needs, focusing around the ability and capabilities of its members to handle power positions, use their power to strengthen the process of education and develop systems of power sharing, transparency and accountability. The training and education processes are organised around the Sanghatan's need to:

- Make development plans for their communities.
- Understand and handle money independently and generate an income for their Sanghatan.
- To run centralised service centres, such as banks, legal aid, fodder centres etc. for the community.
- Become the main mobilisers and educators in the area, while KMVS develops tools by which the village leaders and facilitators could 'educate', mobilise and train.
- To seek knowledge – not just information – and build an in-depth understanding of issues they are engaged with.

After 5 years of failed literacy efforts, the Sangathan leadership finally started making concerted efforts to pick up literacy and numeracy skills. It is not yet a widely held commitment, but it has at least become a widely expressed need…"

This experience is shared by many organisations working with women, including Mahila Samakhya. When they reach a point when women start articulating their demand for literacy skills, they are confronted with yet another problem. Most organisations do not have the capacity to initiate a systematic literacy programme. There are innumerable instances when this lack of capacity becomes a stumbling block. KMVS reached out to Nirantar to facilitate capacity building to venture into literacy. Nirantar – A Centre For Women and Education based in New Delhi – assisted KMVS with developing a curriculum that is relevant to women, preparing literacy primers based on the word method and

training the facilitators to use them. The primers themselves were designed to enable women to read short sentences and words. The issue-based primers were based on women's experiences and deal with issues that they are familiar with and are interested in. The 'educational needs' of women were taken as the point of departure. It was an attempt to link literacy to issues women are engaged in.

Notwithstanding these efforts, KMVS continued to have an ambiguous attitude to literacy and formal education. While it invariably acknowledged the importance of literacy and numeracy in KMVS's overall empowerment strategy, these were never flagged as a priority. As a result, literacy invariably became a supplementary activity. Nirantar team pointed out that within the Sangathan the education unit did not have the same status as other units – it had a subordinate status. Analysing this seeming contradiction, it emerged that KMVS leaders genuinely believe that literacy and education would make a qualitative difference in women's struggle for social justice and equality. But when it comes to choosing between several important intervention areas – savings and credit, handicraft, water and environment, sustainable livelihood and so on – literacy and formal education is pushed down in the priority scale. This situation is further exacerbated when no single or group of individuals is terribly enthusiastic about literacy and formal learning. Being an area where some training and skill is called for, organisational inadequacy often influences prioritisation.

After almost eight years of struggle with adult literacy and continuing education, KMVS has now arrived at a workable and acceptable balance of activities. Since the education resource cell was formally set up it focused intensely on four issues, namely:

i. Capacity building of the Sangathan leaders (preparation of issue specific training material and teaching / learning aids in the form of charts, games, posters and other interactive self learning material);
ii. Education for adolescent girls;
iii. Bringing out the Sangathan newsletter – UJJAS; and
iv. Functioning as documentation and information dissemination cell.

While the earlier attempts at literacy was to concentrate on interested members of Mahila Mandals, the focus now is on women leaders in the Sangathan who need literacy and numeracy skills to implement and manage activities. This effort was stepped up in 1995-96 and as a result there is a surge of demand for continuing education.

Capacity building of Sangathan leaders:

The education unit works with members to plan a systematic capacity building programme for Sangathan leaders. The training teams comprise of members of the education resource unit, other resource units and the executive team. The Sangathan identifies trainees and also the broad areas and issues that need to be covered. The curriculum is formulated as a response to the expressed needs and concerns of the Mahila Mandals and the Taluka Sangathan. The team works closely with the lead group and identifies the strengths and weaknesses and the thrust area for the next couple of years. Often, the lead groups are further divided into sub-groups based on interests in specific issues. The final output of such training is a concrete project. For instance, paralegal

training results in the setting up of a self-managed legal cell. The actual process of education is the responsibility of the education resource unit (assisted by others) and the emphasis is on a constant interplay of formal tools / skills and non-formal learning situations (simulations, training, exposures). The focus is also on creating effective systems and tools of communication so as to ensure that process does not risk being insular. They also ensure that the lead group is in position of strength to share their knowledge with the larger group. This is done through the sharing of experiences, disseminating information, exchanging knowledge, and lobbying for issues affecting them. The overall objective is to develop critical thinking skills to enable empowering social change.

Education of adolescent girls:

Adolescent girls are a particularly vulnerable group in Kutch as they disproportionately bear the burden of survival in the drought economy. The scarcity of drinking water, increased dependence on income generation through embroidery, dependency on drought relief, and the overall high fertility rate – all these factors combine to create a rather dismal existence for young girls. Most of their waking hours are spent fetching drinking water, working on drought relief sites and minding children. Their domestic responsibilities have ironically increased with the advent of KMVS, as it is these young girls who are bearing the additional burden of domestic work while their mothers are involved in "empowering themselves". Way back in 1989-90, the core team of KMVS observed that young girls who accompanied their mothers to literacy classes demonstrated interest and were also very fast learners. At that time the core team of KMVS could not respond to the educational needs of girls. This was partly because of its preoccupation with building the Sangathan and partly because their experience with a high turnover of trained teachers and the resultant disillusionment of the learners.

Learning centres for adolescent girls were initiated in 1995 with 6 groups and 150 girls. This has now been reduced to 4 groups and 100 girls, primarily because of high turnover of trained teachers. KMVS is now planning to open 30 such centres-teacher training for these new centres is presently on. The emphasis is on basic literacy, contextual information (culture, science, health among others) and knowledge of life skills (reproductive health and rights). The initiative was designed as a 2-year course, specifically geared towards girls in 11-18 age group. The objective is to create a legitimate space where girls could access knowledge - especially relating to reproductive health, inheritance laws, government structures, and facilitate access to skill areas - electrical repairing, veterinary care – that have utilitarian value. Shiksha Samitis, comprising of both men and women, were formed through the Mahila Mandal to oversee the centres and address problems within government run schools. These Samitis interact with the education unit to identify specific issues and also address the work burden of children - especially girls.

The Sangathan has worked out criteria for the selection of villages for establishing a adolescent education centre. Among the criteria are the presence of an active Mahila Mandal, lack of educational infrastructure, readiness and motivation of a critical number of girls and the prevalence of child-marriage, dowry related atrocities and other social

problems. An interested Mahila Mandals submits a proposal and list of learners to the Taluka Samiti, which in turn approves as per the criteria mentioned above. The education unit, along with the Sangathan, identifies potential teachers and organises training. The teachers are paid Rupees 800 per month and also receive a certificate of experience. A minimum of three hours of instruction is mandatory. A school fee of Rs 10 per month is returned to the student who completes the programme with 100% attendance. Dropouts have to forego their fees.

The objective of this effort is not to set up parallel primary schools, but to accelerate learning and enable the young women who complete the course to successfully integrate with the existing government school infrastructure. Hence, the resource unit's energies are also spent towards maintaining effective linkages with the DPEP to ensure continuity and gender-sensitive learning environment in schools. To this end, the Sangathan works closely with DPEP in creating an environment for greater participation in primary education. The Shiksha Samiti also monitors the existing primary schools.

The most difficult aspect of this programme is identifying, building and sustaining a local cadre of teachers. In the last two years, two centres in Abdasa Taluka were shut down because of caste dynamics. There was palpable tension between the Koli students and their upper-caste teacher. Apart from caste dynamics, the community is more comfortable with female teachers. However given the history of the region, finding educated women, that too from the more backward castes is very difficult. Furthermore, since these centres are spread across the region, even if a teacher is identified in the neighbouring area, physical mobility remains a major problem. Public transport is irregular and unreliable and young women find it difficult to commute every day. The lack of social and economic infrastructure in the region also acts as a disincentive in attracting committed talent from outside the region.

Ujjas:

UJJAS

The monthly newsletter covers issues of women's concerns in an accessible language and is primarily meant for the neo-literate and illiterate women. The newsletter has 2 teams – six reporters and four editorial staff. The latter are responsible for the printing, formatting and the graphics. The team members are selected on the basis of interest, ease of mobility, ability to collect information, ability to communicate, and ability to read and write with certain degree of proficiency. Information to be published is solicited from the different Taluka Samitis, local voluntary organisation, important people in the area, government agencies, Sarpanches and magazines / newspapers. For the past three years the National Foundation of India has funded it. It is mailed to the members and even through this mundane task of mailing performs the symbolic task of forging women's identities as individuals. The screen-printed edition has further challenged the myth of printing as a masculine task that requires professional training.

About 2500 copies are printed every month. The operating cost is between Rupees 12-13000 per month. A survey conducted after 2 years of UJJAS revealed that among the readers - 32 % are women, 16% are men, 25% are adolescent girls and 26% are adolescent boys. The survey also revealed that 37% of readers canvass the newsletter in their community and 9% of readers discuss issues related to the newsletter. The readers are interested in the editorials, home remedies, savings and credit and short stories. The survey revealed that readers would like more coverage of national news, political stories and market trends. With a steadily growing readership, the newsletter is emerging as a potent socio-political tool of the Sangathan – emphasising the potential of this medium as a tool for change.

This is an information and documentation cell managed by the Sangathan. It was designed as the voice of the Sangathans and is responsible for recording social processes and disseminating information. It has its origins in a newsletter that was conceived in 1992-93 at the end of a literacy camp by the participants themselves. Since then the newsletter has evolved from being a hand-written photocopied broadsheet to a screen-printed edition created, prepared, edited, and screen-printed by rural women. The primary purpose of introducing the newsletter is to foster bonds and networks between members, document activities, disseminate information, and engage in public relations through strategic mailings to key administrators and political leaders**.**

The UJJAS unit is based in Mundra. The Taluka Sangathan plays the lead role in its management and development. Apart from the newsletter the cell, in collaboration with the panchayat unit, has also innovatively used the medium of radio to launch a weekly programme on issues of women and local governance – Kunjal Panje Kutchji. The programme relies completely on local talent and has won many admirers in the region. The unit is in the process of developing issue-based broadsheets - environment, handicrafts, and savings. It also functions as information clearing house, maintains a library and subscribes to newspapers. It is now working towards strengthening the documentation cell to keep pace with information.

The Sangathan is now working towards making this unit financially viable by providing services to other units and undertaking commercial printing jobs. Currently, it publishes the environment and savings newsletter, training materials and commercial orders for stationery, posters, and visiting cards. In the next couple of years, it is planning to take

out specialised booklets on the PDS system, social security, labour laws and hazardous industries. This unit is gradually enhancing the Sangathan's ability to put together a critical mass of information for use by the people of Kutch. As the three-year grant from NFI has come to a close, effort to make it sustainable is now a priority activity for the Sangathan.

Kunjal Panje Kutchji
(Sarus Crane of our Kutch)

In 1999, UJJAS extended its community role through the medium of radio. It was during this time that KMVS was also extending itself to address the emerging issues facing elected women in the Panchayats. Thus, under the aegis of the education unit and in collaboration with the Panchayat resource unit, a weekly radio programme – Kunjal Panje Kutchji - of 30 minutes duration was launched by KMVS in December 1999. This program came to a close in December 2000 after completing 53 episodes over one full year of broadcast.

The program took the form of dramatised serial anchored by the character of a Sarus Crane (Kunjal), a much loved and revered migratory bird of Kutch. Kunjal relates the story of a mythical village called Ujjas and its people, weaving into the storyline a range of gender and social concerns specific to Kutch. The drama yields to a 6-minute documentary module called "Kutch Kochhanto" (Kutch Speaks) featuring interviews with a range of opinion leaders, government officials, village women and men. A team of 6 reporters, consisting of rural women and men, were recruited and trained to undertake the task of recording and editing these interviews.

Though scripted with the help of a professional writer, Paresh Naik, and mounted with the direction support of Drishti Media Collective in Ahmedabad, the program sought to provide a platform for local expression and dialogue – through participation by local communities in the drama, song, and news-reporting.

The Ravi Matthai Centre for Educational Innovation, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, supported KMVS in conducting village-based surveys to assess the impact of the radio program on the ground. The first survey conducted three months after broadcast indicated a dedicated listenership of 6%. After 10 months of broadcast, this figure had grown to 50% of surveyed Kutchis and 80% of the radio-owning population of Kutch.

This radio program was awarded the Chameli Devi Jain Award 2000 by the Media Foundation, New Delhi in March 2001.

Ujjas recently started a bi-weekly broadcast of a new 15-minute radio program called "Tu Jiyaro Ain" (You are Alive) in March 2001 in the aftermath of the earthquake, once again with the support of Drishti Media Collective. The program is in a magazine format and features a range of interviews, songs and profiles to capture and grapple with the enormous complexity and range of issues that the earthquake has left in its wake.

Both these programs, broadcast from All India Radio, Bhuj, are financially supported by UNDP-GOI, including the cost of commercial airtime. This is probably the first such experiment undertaken by a voluntary organisation in the country.

Source: Drishti Media Collective, Ahmedabad, April 2001

The education unit is therefore in a unique position today – it supports other units and is also empowering itself in the process. However, this very attribute is also a source of concern and frustration for the resource team as "it is everywhere and yet nowhere".

Sometimes, the training materials they labour over and create are not used or even if they are used, the unit has no control over how they are used. The education team is particularly concerned about literacy activities – they are sometimes at a loss to convince rural women to invest time and resources in literacy sans tangible benefits. The last year, however, has been a landmark as it marked the successful completion of the first two-year adolescent girls education programme. The emergence of a group of girls with concrete educational skills has been a morale booster. This has generated a lot of enthusiasm among the group and is clearly defining the current training of the new batch of local teachers.

Legal Cell:

Domestic violence is a pervasive theme latent in conversations with Kutchi rural women. This is manifestly reinforced by the growing incidence of unnatural deaths and suicides reported among young women – especially in Mundra and Abdasa. KMVS's initial experiences in relation to the issue of violence are fairly representative of the larger trend – women can be easily persuaded to talk about their concerns in relation to the lack of developmental infrastructure in the village or their inability to demand a fair wage for their labour. However, hesitation, silence, emotional distance, or a quiet acceptance usually marks discussions on domestic violence. KMVS's early initiatives to tackle issues of violence were rather limiting and mainly concentrated on interventions in individual lives of Mahila Mandal members that came to their notice. In 1992, funded by the Gujarat State Social Welfare Board, the Family Counselling Centres (FCC) were launched to deal with family crises and violence. However, work was rather intermittent. The unnatural death of Bina Ben in Bhuj and the subsequent public debate and rallies in which KMVS along with other local women's organisations was an active participant, was crucial in catapulting the issue from the personal to the public realm. Although the said incident occurred in Bhuj, the ripples were felt in the rural areas. FCCs in the different Talukas found themselves dealing with a spate of complaints and enquiries on the issue of intra-family conflict and violence. The complexity of cases that emerged precluded counselling from being the only viable solution. Subsequently the FCC was phased out in 1995, making way for the creation of the legal resource unit and the accompanying local legal aid cells. The issues of women's security – mental, physical, and legal - and their well being moved from the margin to the centre in the quest for women's empowerment.

The objectives of the legal resource unit are twofold: First, to train and develop a team of paralegal workers from the community with a view to developing a pro-active rural watch-team to monitor rights violations. The legal unit co-ordinates with the education unit as well as CSJ to develop the legal training package that spans a whole spectrum of issues:

- What constitutes justice / injustice;
- Comparative understanding of traditional / customary and modern methods of justice;
- The Indian Constitution
- Legal aspects of women's rights;
- Police force: structure, procedure and functioning; exposure to police stations;

- Judicial structure and exposure to courts; difference between criminal law and civil law;
- Family law – maintenance, dowry, abuse, rape, suicide, inheritance and other personal laws;
- Laws relating to revenue land / Panchayat land, and
- Criminal Procedure Code / Rules.

The second objective is to initiate locally run legal aid centres in the Talukas with support from lawyers from Centre for Social Justice, Bhuj. This unit focuses on direct intervention in case of atrocities, counselling, legal support to women in cases of harassment, land inheritance, violence, maintenance, child custody etc. Through this process, they attempt to demystify the law and the legal profession and increase local capability to handle primary level investigative, counselling, pre-litigation aspect of cases that are filed with the Sangathan. The resource unit in turn tries to sensitise CSJ lawyers to gender issues. They also interface between Sangathan members and the lawyers.

These centres are fully functional in Mundra and Abdasa and service 80 villages. Preparations are underway to extend the services in the other 2 Talukas. Currently Abdasa handles the caseload from Nakhatrana. The latter is in the process of identifying its legal team for the paralegal training, which is to begin soon. Mundra is the showcase Taluka for the legal unit. Cases that are commonly brought to the centre are concerned with "marital maladjustment". A majority of cases are resolved through counselling. Domestic violence is a major issue and almost 80% of all cases pertain to violence within the home. A cursory survey of the data reveals that most complaints of violence are from women in the 18-25 age group.

Integration of the legal dimension in dealing with issues like domestic violence has made women aware of their legal rights and as a result women have the option of legal redressal. Yet, there is also a fear that this may reduce the process of redressal to a mechanical implementation of laws. This can be partly fuelled by the presence of lawyers who are more inclined to turn every case into a court case to add to their success rate. Therefore the legal unit and the Sangathan has tried to be creative and resourceful in dealing with these issues – how to maintain a balance between courts and out of court settlements keeping the best interests of the client in mind. A team of lawyers have been assigned to the legal cells to work with women and generate alternative perspectives and break the cell's dependency on a single lawyer. Further, there has also been a collective realisation among the Sangathan members that that violence cannot be tackled only at the individual level. A shared and collective reality needs to be addressed by the community at large. The Sangathan is making efforts to move beyond seeking "case" solutions and take up the issue of violence within the larger community. At the same time, it also realises that domestic violence is context and community specific and does not lend itself to generalisable solutions. Studies are being undertaken of specific community practices to document and understand customs and traditions that hinder women's legal standing.

The legal cell is still young and has a long way to go. What is important is that women's rights and their sense of dignity has become a important issue in the Sangathan. Educating the larger community is perhaps the biggest challenge faced by the Sangathan.

Harnessing emerging opportunities for local self - governance and Panchayat Raj:

The panchayat unit was created in 1997 in tandem with the larger WGWI-G initiative to identify and mobilise the women Sarpanches across the state. KMVS, as part of the network, was entrusted with the task of mobilising and orienting the Kutchi unit. While KMVS was aware of the ramifications of the 73rd amendment it had yet to familiarise itself with the Panchayat Raj Act and actually deal with the issues surrounding women and local governance in a concrete manner; this provided a perfect learning opportunity. The process was initiated through the implementation of a 1-day training of all Mahila Sarpanches at the Taluka level across the district. Through an innovative game of questions set to music (designed along the lines of musical chairs), the knowledge level of the participating sarpanches and their capabilities, interest and commitment was gauged. Based on this exercise about 40 sarpanches were further selected to participate along with 20 Sangathan members in a 2-day workshop in Bhuj. The DDO as well as the Area Project Officer participated as resource persons in this training and discussions were organised on the needs of and difficulties faced by Mahila Sarpanches, their administrative responsibilities, and the rules and norms of conduct of office. After this training 40 sarpanches travelled to Ahmedabad to participate in the WGWI-G sponsored event.

After this initial exercise, the Panchayat unit was formally constituted with the mandate to develop a critical mass of elected women representatives in the Panchayat and create positive role models for their peers. Further it was to also facilitate the creation of a forum of elected women representatives in the district able to raise issues of development and governance irrespective of party affiliations. A study was commissioned to survey 203 Mahila Sarpanches of Kutch - their issues and their status. This helped the unit identify training needs. They are designed an ambitious 9 module curriculum spread over 12 months, spanning issues relating to confidence-building, leadership, Panchayat Raj Act, self-autonomy, lobbying, building knowledge bases. 30 women sarpanches were selected to participate in a 12-month training programme. Initially the training was organised over one weekend every month. However, geographical distances in the district made it impossible for all the sarpanches to congregate in Bhuj and the training was marked by irregular attendance and low turnout - completely undermining the learning potential of these meetings.

The unit now organises zone based training workshops (east, south central, and northwest). Low turnout that marked the previous meetings has been addressed and as a result the number of participants increased from 28 to 57. The curriculum initially designed to build a holistic perspective on women, local governance, and development changed drastically in response to the pressing needs of the sarpanches, because during the training workshops it was realised that women were keen to get advise on concrete problems facing them in the field. Being preoccupied with their own problems, women

were impatient with long-term perspective building sessions. For example, one Sarpanch wanted to collect taxes from a petrol pump located in her jurisdiction. However, the other members in this venture who would not show up, hence making it difficult for her to pass a resolution, isolated her. She wanted to know what constituted a quorum and how one passes a resolution in the absence of a quorum? Similarly, the growing incidence of no-confidence motions against women Sarpanches emerged as a urgent issue. Such practical matters took precedence over planned modules.

Responding to this situation, a committee of 7 Sarpanches was formed to find a solution to this situation. A contingent comprising of legal unit members and Sarpanches participated in the public hearings of Mahila Sarpanches held in Ajmer District of Rajasthan organised by Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti as a part of the ongoing right to information campaign in Beawar. The focus of this meet was transparency for good governance. Similarly, as a part of a statewide campaign initiated by WGWI-G, a team of Sarpanches were entrusted with the task of identifying women in their villages who did not access the governemnt social security schemes like old age and widow pensions. This was done in the context of the information that almost Rupees 8 to 10 crores of social security scheme funds lapse because the rural poor do not access them, either because they do not know about them or the administration makes little effort to propagate these schemes. Such issues and also information are then disseminated in a creative manner through the radio programme – Kunjal Panje Kutchji. Consequently the weekly radio programme is generating considerable interest in the community as is evident from their letters which are filled with queries regarding Panchayat procedures, opinions on the 73rd amendment, and their experiences with women sarpanches.

The panchayat unit reports that 19 sarpanches have been motivated – they go to the Panchayat regularly, look-over the correspondence and transact developmental work in the village. They have also initiated financial planning. However, given the larger political climate in the county such attempts do not always get a positive reception from the larger political community. It is reported that 14 Mahila Sarpanches have faced no-confidence motions, 2 have been forced to resign and 4 have been dismissed. KMVS is in the process of filing a public interest litigation to challenge the constitutionality of some of the dismissals. These developments have, thankfully, strengthened their resolve to fight for justice.

The process of working with women sarpanches has emerged as a critical learning ground for KMVS. The mode of operation of the panchayat unit is different from the rest of the units – its scope is not limited to the Sangathan or KMVS. The unit works across the entire district, including the Talukas where KMVS does not have an institutional presence - Mandvi-Bhuj, and Rapar-Bachau. It also works with individual sarpanches with a view to create Mahila Mandals in their respective villages. Hence there is more distance and KMVS has less direct control over processes that are initiated in the villages. Another qualitative difference is that the unit is working with women who are formally vested with legal authority and power and need enabling resources to deploy that authority effectively. This requires different set of inputs and has varied outcomes.

The process has also opened up a possibility of a new model of working for KMVS. Currently, there is not direct link between Sarpanches and the Sangathan. The Mahila Mandals are a subset of the Gram Sabha and if the Mahila Mandals play a proactive role in providing leadership in the village, it can open up a range of possibilities. This has tremendous potential for social and economic transformation. The Sangathan being a federation of Mahila Mandals will then acquire a new role in a swiftly changing scenario. The success of this strategy is contingent upon further strengthening Mahila Mandals and the Taluka Sangathan.

Concluding Remarks:

Presently, KMVS finds itself at the crossroads – facing the competing demands of a mass-based movement as well as the exigencies of being a support NGO. The current challenge for KMVS is to address simultaneously the need to produce useful services while strengthening the capability of action and handle the tensions and trade-offs between these competing objectives. The KMVS team is cognisant of this and is critically looking at the emerging relationship between KMVS, the resource units and the Taluka Sangathans. The 1998-99 report submitted to the Tata Trust highlights four areas of concern that the KMVS team has identified as being crucial to its future planning:

- The first concern relates to the dynamics of support and autonomy between the resource units and the Sangathans - how much centralisation is desirable and how much decentralisation should be initiated. The question is further complicated by the fact that all the areas of intervention have their own dynamics and imperatives and hence a general solution is not desirable. For instance, SCP is an autonomous programme managed by the Sangathan, which in turn accepts the resource unit's monitoring role and gives it space to raise issues to initiate a learning process. The onus is on the unit to define its field of intervention. The question is whether it should be more proactive and intervenes in cases of partisan decision-making or play a reactive role of crises management and post facto analysis for learning from its own mistakes. In environmental initiatives, the technical nature of support sought and the diversity within the ecological zone implies a greater dependency on the resource unit. How then can this unit tackle this dependency and yet build self-confidence among women?
- The second issue identified by KMVS is how to sustain a balance between quantity and quality, i.e. should KMVS expand its geographical base or should it focus on improving its existing activities in the current KMVS villages. Sangathan women are the leaders and mobilisers. The ability to respond to emerging needs for expansion of area of operation or the range of activities is contingent on resource support from KMVS. The resource units concern with maintaining quality and not spreading their limited resources thin – could generate tension. How can KMVS resolve this tension?
- The third issue is how to maintain a balance between a "movement" approach and developmental inputs (skills and managerial inputs). Over the years the mobilisation and organisation building responsibilities have been devolved to the Sangathans. KMVS staff is increasing playing the role of specialists – especially since the formalisation of the resource units. While the old guard have a grasp of larger developmental issues and have a more holistic experience base and

perspective, the more recent entrants into the KMVS family have been thrust into specialised roles and that too in a implementation mode. Given this reality there is a danger of breeding insularity in thinking and losing out on a holistic perspective. It has been proposed that RSC members should forge an intensive link with one village to avoid conceptual fragmentation that is inevitable if they only learn through their subjects. Further, it has also been observed that RSC tends to direct women towards doing things rather than strategising and doing long-term planning. This may lead to a more instrumental and managerial approach, rather than a strategic approach to empowerment.

- The final issue relates to integrating professionals with expertise from outside into the resource units without disturbing the power dynamics of the existing team. Currently the members primarily comprise of local social workers and this is in keeping with KMVS's commitment to building local leadership. This has also limited the capacity of the organisation to harness technical support in education and health (the environment work has the advantage of interfacing with Sahjeevan). This might, in the long run, limit the capability of the local resource units. Should the solution be to inject more professional knowledge through short-term integration of outside professionals or on the job training be instituted for the local workers. Will this undermine the strength and confidence of indigenous leadership?

There is no doubt that at the end of a decade, KMVS's methodology of empowerment has hinged on the emergence, action and interaction, and consolidation of the Sangathan as well as the resource units. Its journey towards its vision of a flexible federation of Sangathan and resource units committed to women's empowerment is no longer a distant dream – but a tangible reality. The next chapter shifts the focus from the resource units to the Sangathan, individual women, and the relationships between them and attempts to present a more nuanced understanding of the collective as well as individual aspects of empowerment at the grassroots. The lens used to understand and document the process of empowerment fuelled by KMVS now relies on a bottom-up perspective as opposed to the top-down perspective of the resource units.

CHAPTER III

Cartographies Of Empowerment: Women's Voices

> "A range of people in the District of Kutch say that the advent of KMVS has made a difference in the lives of rural women and influenced people's attitude towards women and development. We were greeted with beaming smiles as we walked into a rural hamlet, a tea stall or a local bus station. Adults and children welcomed us as we alighted from the vehicle in the remote villages of Tal and Layari in Nakhatrana. As we walked into a community hall the enthusiasm of women (from different communities, religions, and villages) attending a Sangathan meeting in Mundra to strategize for an anti-alcohol campaign was palpable and infectious. A sense of pride and ownership was evident in conversations about their pivotal role in natural resource conservation and management in Khari, Pachcham. Here were a group of highly articulate women who had a good understanding of issues of sustainable development. Moving from one Taluka to another, we met women who were a far cry from the traditional portrayal of helpless women peeping from the secluded space of their home. At the Taluka Sangathan meeting in Abdasa, we were witnessed a discussion on domestic violence. We were struck by the maturity with which they analysed domestic violence and unnatural deaths – as a community problem and not the private and personal problem of individual women. Travelling through Kutch, halting at villages, talking to women and men, and sitting in meetings left us with no doubt that women's perceptions of self and their relations with each other - to men, communities, village, and the state - are being transformed in significant ways. Yet, reports and statistics failed to capture and convey the texture of change – what was happening to women, how have their lives changed and how has the community responded? In this chapter we attempt to capture, as far as possible, the texture of empowerment." (Vimala Ramachandran and Aarti Saihjee)

This chapter is about what the decade long process of empowerment has personally meant to women. Through an intimate exploration of women's voices, silences, and experiences, an effort is made to map out the various aspects of women's empowerment – as collectives and individuals – and explore the inherent tensions and contradictions in the process. The framework used to understand the process of empowerment and, to a degree, measure its outcomes and benefits for women in tangible and intangible terms is based on ideas developed by Kabeer (1994), Murty (1994), and Batliwala (1998), and Ramachandran (2000). This understanding has also been complemented by the quantitative data generated by the Impact Assessment Survey that was independently conducted by KMVS in March 2000[11].

A Framework For Analysis:

> "Poor women are caught in a vicious situation where social isolation that stems from lack of mobility and access to information and knowledge beyond their

[11] A random sample survey was conducted covering 348 women, which constitutes 5% of the total membership of the Sangathan. Care was taken to represent all communities and regions and the survey covered 36 villages across 4 Talukas.

> immediate presence alienates them from decision-making processes within the family and in the society. In a social milieu where women are not valued as human beings, they perceive themselves as victims of even of well-intentioned programmes and schemes that purport to address their health, education, employment, and family planning needs. Women have little control over or knowledge about their body and their life. All these factors reinforce a very low self-image. Ultimately poor women are trapped in their own self-perception. And the prevailing unequal gender relations perpetuate this perception." (Ramachandran 2000, 3)

Conversations with women reveal that their language has been transformed, constantly peppered with terms like "vikas" (development), "sashastrikaran" (empowerment), "jagruti' (awareness), "Sangathan" (organisation), "mahiti" (information) to name a few. Despite these words being very recent additions to their lexicon, the ease, facility, and sophistication with which these terms are being engaged with leaves the observer with little doubt regarding the internalisation of not only these terms but also the ideas that define them. This is not to claim that there is a monolithic understanding of these terms – on the contrary dialogue reveals that women's understanding and deployment of these terms are very inter-related and contextual and are often defined by the larger material reality that frames their lives.

What does development mean to women?

- It is the elimination of dependency on the state that has been created by the increasing frequency of drought and a vision of a self-sustaining and self-reliant existence.
- Having access to information that has traditionally been denied and becoming aware of larger social, economic and political issues.
- In the present degraded environment, development is a more tangible process – it is about reinvigorating traditional sources of local water and learning new skills of natural resource conservation and management.
- For a grieving mother who has recently lost a daughter in childbirth, reproductive health – as a partnership between both men and women – is the true essence of development as it creates the possibility of healthy human lives.
- In a region plagued by a high incidence of unnatural deaths of young women, "development" is also about women having a legitimate say in their children's (specifically daughters) marriage, opposing child marriages, ending discrimination between sons and daughters, and it is also about overcoming social norms that restrict women's mobility.
- And yet for others it is something as basic as 'dignity of work and the ability to feed oneself and the family' and no longer being called a junglee … about being accepted by mainstream society.

For most women "development" and "empowerment" are inextricably entwined and the key components are accessing information, becoming conscious, and mobilising. Empowerment is viewed by women as a state of "being conscious of their rights", about having the "ability to form Sangathans to influence village decisions, and their "ability to

work with men, not against them". For Parma, a Trustee of KMVS from Pachcham, "empowerment is a process whereby women become more informed and aware, their lives are able to move beyond the confines of their homes and family … to implement what one learns, become role models, and claim their rightful place in the outside world and contribute to their society's development. … Action is important – no women can be truly empowered only through access to information. She needs to act on that information"[12].

These voices reflect that there is nothing straightforward about the process of women's empowerment and its dynamic nature actually militates against a precise definition or an exact delineation of an empowered state. Empowerment is a dynamic concept that is located at the intersection of the material as well as the symbolic, spanning multiple domains – basic survival and well-being, increased endowments, improved entitlements, and enhanced security and self-esteem-not necessarily following a linear progression. It is also a discursive process-a process through which women become conscious and produce meanings through interpretation and reconstruction of their own history and in turn become vocal subjects who are able to define and defend their interests. It is also about achieving tangible development objectives and yet it is also primarily about re-negotiation of social relations of power (between men and women, between men, and between women), which define women's access to and control of resources – material, human, and intangible-and defies being mapped in a simplistic cause-effect matrix. The picture is further complicated by the undeniable observation that that gender relations, as they get acted out in varied social contexts, are usually marked by the dynamics of conflict and co-operation and as such do not lend themselves to an easy resolution. As Amartya Sen (1990:147) remarks:

> "Conflicts of interests between men and women are unlike other conflicts. A worker and capitalist do not typically live under the same roof – sharing concerns and experiences and acting jointly. This aspect of 'togetherness' gives the gender conflict some very special characteristics".

Further, the pursuit of empowerment also imposes contrary demands on women. On one hand women are constantly called upon to challenge mainstream forces that disempower them and yet are also forced to function within that very system to ensure access to material and social resources that are crucial to their survival. Given these indeterminate as well as socially contingent attributes, how does one attempt to "determine" empowerment.

This chapter relies on the empowerment indicators identified and explicated upon in Kabeer (1994), Murty (1994), and Batliwala (1998), and Ramachandran (2000) to create an interlocking contextual matrix to frame our understanding of women's empowerment. The identified categories of empowerment indicators are:

- Women, work and their access to and control over productive assets and resources.

[12] Aarti Saihjee - Interviews and discussion with Sangathan leaders in March and April 2000.

- Women's access to public resources – forests, commons, water, sanitation, education, health etc.
- Control over labour and access to income
- Women's control over their own bodies
- Physical mobility and security
- Access to intangible resources
- Law and mechanism for legal redressal
- Women's access to decision-making fora and political spaces

A review of KMVS's intervention strategies outlined in Chapter 2 indicate that none of the identified parameters have been ignored and tangible gains have been made at all fronts – be it income generation through handicrafts, accessing health services or savings and credit schemes, participating in environmental initiatives, demystifying law and making women aware of their rights, and increasing their political participation. KMVS's methodology for empowerment is not just simply about enhancing women's resource base; it is also about re-negotiation of gender relations within the household as well as the larger community in order to establish equal control of both men and women over these resources. The latter however requires a nuanced and contextual account of the complex and often ambiguous relationships that frame the process of women's empowerment. Hence, the framework of analysis, along with attention to quantitative indicators, also pays greater attention to the voices and the silences that mark men and women's conversations in order to map the fluctuating fortunes of the empowerment process. What are the trade-offs, if any, between public versus personal empowerment, individual versus collective empowerment, and economic versus other modes of empowerment for different women? How do cultural and ideological controls pertaining to gender, caste, and class mediate the ongoing socio-economic transformation and what are the consequences for women? Given the diversity of communities in Kutch and women's multiple identities, how are/can women's shared interests with men belonging to their family, class, community reconcile with their gender specific mode of marginalisation? These are some of the questions that guide this exploration of empowerment parameters.

Parameters of empowerment:

Is the mere presence of development projects and organisations sufficient condition to bring about social change? Or is it a product of complex interplay of internal processes and external inputs. Women, in order to participate in the Mahila Mandals and Sangathans, have had to move outside into the public sphere and engage in varied struggles – both personally as well as collectively-and have experienced their fair share of ups and downs. One needs to be aware that these women were not always convinced that working or co-operating with KMVS was to their advantage. Hence, the first step for some of these women, especially those who were the first to commit themselves to KMVS, was to struggle and negotiate with their own selves regarding their decision to work with KMVS, including taking social risks of alienating one's own kin. Negotiating with men in the family and the community really comes later. According to Alla Bachai from Laiyari,

"Initially when KMVS team started visiting the villages there was a lot of fear and mistrust among the village people. We, men and women, were confused as to why young urban women want to devote their time to help poor villagers. There were so many rumours circulating in the village – they were from the CID sent to spy or they had been sent to spirit our children away. ... They were also on their own and were interested in working with women! This made men more suspicious about them as they did not want us-their own Jat women-to be corrupted by fancy urban ideas. Even we women were sceptical about what these young women wanted us to do. When we realised it was about handicrafts and increasing our incomes, we were ready. But we had not bargained for having to attend meetings, which would take us out of our village. Even in times of sickness women do not leave home, and here we were being asked to do it on a whim. It is not easy for us to put our trust in strangers at the cost of alienating our own husbands and families. When we were asked to come to Nakhatrana for a meeting to plan for handicraft activities we were explicitly told that women were to come on our own. We were not ready for this. We needed the orders for handicrafts so we asked our men to come with us to Nakhatrana and remain in the market and provide us with support. … It was the persistence of the KMVS team and our constant exposure to them that convinced a few people among us that we could trust them. The rest of the village still maintained a distance. Once the watershed development work began in Laiyari, the whole village started accepting KMVS and also gave approval to their other activities like girl's education."

Similarly, a Muslim woman observed that she did not fear KMVS because of its insistence on women in the public sphere. Rather the tension for her was how to mediate one's allegiance to the Islamic faith that does not allow public expression and free interaction. Mostly all women identified their struggle to transgress social norms that define "Ojhal" and "Vas" as crucially significant in their personal journey of empowerment. The different communities of Kutch – the Dalit, Muslim, Darbar, Brahmin, Ahir, and Koli – all have specific norms regarding women's mobility and social interaction between communities that greatly circumscribe women's scope of activities. According to Hakku of Dador, "KMVS's efforts to organise women have depended on women coming out of their homes, and this has been completely against the prevailing social norms of Ojhal. I was afraid that if I broke this norm then my husband might leave me. It was fear, the fear of the unknown, that held us back". On the other hand Vimla commented:

> "I was hesitant to join the Sangathan. My husband is domineering and has a rotten temper. However, once I got interested there was no holding back. It was as if I had found my faith and the physical abuse, which I had to suffer was just a minor irritation. When things became too difficult to handle I would stop going to work and the other Sangathan members would be very supportive and often intervened on my behalf. … By and by we (husband and wife) came to an understanding where I would not travel to other villages but would restrict myself to handling administrative work at the Sangathan office. I was also earning a monthly salary and that also helped to make my work more acceptable to my husband." Vimla was subsequently elected as a trustee from Abdasa in 1997.

Mobility, security and community boundaries:

Over the years there is a palpable and tangible change in the community's attitude towards women' mobility and their interaction with the outside world. This is evident in the number of women who participated in training programmes in the last three years. The Impact Assessment Survey done in the different Talukas reveals that most Sangathan members have participated in some sort of training:

Number of respondents who participated in training programmes (1996-99):

Savings	82
Health	53
Environment	66
Panchayat	25
Education	37
Handicraft	33
Legal	15

Yet, women across different Talukas women continue to debate their mobility and this remains seemingly unresolved – primarily because the practice of "Ojhal" simultaneously constrains as well as protects them and that there might be a trade-off for some women between autonomy and security. Higher caste Muslim, Darbar and Rajput women are, as a cultural norm, confined to their homes. This is intended to reflect their community's higher social standing. For these women the ability to move outside of home is very significant and if this allows them access to economic resources independent of men – then it is a major triumph. Darbar women claim that men hold up the spectre of "maryada" (honour) to confine them to their homes. This was discussed in a recent Mahila Mandal meeting in Baraiya (Mundra Taluka). What was interesting that some women candidly voiced their opinion that women, themselves, to control other women especially daughters-in-law and daughters, often deploy the ideology behind "maryada". Hence it should not primarily be viewed as a male prerogative. Further, women were urged to critically look at their own lives and to see whether they evoked the concept as an apology for their own inaction or did men impose it. A clearly evident trend is that women in their late thirties and beyond, with grown-up children, dominate Sangathans' activities. They experience more flexible norms regarding mobility. Yet these women often end up imposing the norms of "Ojhal" on their daughters and daughter-in-laws. Many of them are wary of taking the social risk of encouraging a "non-conforming" daughter. Hakima Bai insightfully remarked:

> "People usually recourse to "samaj" (community) and "reeti" (tradition) to justify their inaction. They are right. Who is the community? We are. Our husbands, in-laws, and extended kin are the community. If you flout norms, there is no escaping from them and the larger consequences".

Another interesting trend is that some women have used this opportunity to get rid of negative connotations of restriction and control implicit in the concept of "Ojhal" and reinvent it to connote trust, confidence, and honour so that women can move about

without their honour being questioned by society. There are others who dismiss as fallacy the notion that freedom of mobility is necessary for empowerment[13]. They believe that women can empower themselves through strategic participation in activities which do not openly challenge social norms yet create spaces for resistance. Hira Ba, a Brahmin woman has been working with the Sangathan for the last decade. Her activism has been acceptable to her husband. Yet, she has maintained a façade of "Ojhal" for her in-laws who live in another Taluka – with support from her husband and children. There are others who have used the legitimacy of Sangathan activities like health, credit, and handicrafts to create social spaces, albeit restricted, for their own personal mobility.

Devuba – a profile

Devuba is a traditional patchwork artisan and a member of the Karigar Sangathan. She has been involved with KMVS for more than 5 years. In 1994 she was elected as the handicraft Samiti representative for Nakhatrana Taluka. She belongs to the Sodha community and tradition dictates that the women of her community do not leave their "Vas" except in extenuating circumstances relating to illness and marriage and always accompanied by men of the community. However, she has been able to redefine these societal boundaries and negotiate greater freedom of movement. She, along with other women in the Mahila Mandal, have received training under the NABARD supported training programmes on cutting and dividing cloth, quality control and collection – all very important skills for the self-management of the production process. Devuba feels that this training has enabled the women to better understand components of the production process such as quality, designs and deadlines.

More importantly, Devuba observes that since women have formed a collective, they have begun to support each. For example, in the early years women who went to the Taluka office for monthly preparation and design of patchwork cloth were labelled as being of questionable honour. These attitudes have now changed and many more women go out of the village for work or for shopping without being accompanied by men.

In Devuba's village each woman produces one or two bedspreads per month and earns Rupees 200-300 every month. They have now linked up with the DWCRA scheme and have also elected a treasurer of their group. The Mahila Mandal has also expressed interest in joining the savings and credit scheme and is also ready for a literacy programme. A lot has changed for women and as they grow their own aspirations are also growing.

Adapted from Popplewell (1996)

For women engaged in wage labour mobility still remains an issue. Rakku, a wage labourer remarks: "Earlier when I used to go for wage labour I did not do so on my free will. I went because my family needed the money and food to survive. Now when I move between villages or make a trip to the Sangathan office in relation to the environment Samiti – there is a difference. It is my decision and I am in control. I feel there is more of freedom. This does not mean that my family does not need the money I earn." Rakku's subjective understanding of mobility insightfully shifts the focus from mobility per se to the larger social context in which certain norms are enforced and others relaxed. More

[13] Batliwala (1998) argues that physical mobility by itself can never be truly empowering unless it is accompanied by the guarantee of physical security for women.

than mobility per se, it is this social context that ultimately makes physical mobility an empowering experience.

What is striking about the struggle for mobility is that draws upon collective resources to further the struggle and yet it is played out in individual homes. Women do not stage a sit-in or a rally; rather they constantly negotiate for more space and leverage their collective forum to argue, cajole and demand greater freedom. Women report that they do not always demand freedom of mobility as a right; rather it is constantly negotiated privilege that is often bestowed on them through exercise of masculine prerogative. Consequently, the struggle for mobility, despite being rather creative in its expressions, is never politicised.

The political dynamics that characterise women's mobility are further intensified by those of "Vas" – social as well as spatial interaction between dominant and subordinate social groups. These dynamics are clearly visible in the geographical configuration of villages and their divisions into community-specific habitats. Women are never perceived, as qua women, they simultaneously represent their class as well as caste groups. Interestingly, Dalit women in leadership positions say they have greater social acceptance in their own community and have had to work harder to win the trust of the non-Dalit women. The process of negotiating the extant social hierarchies is at times painful and at other times the politics of need such as for medicines/transportation are instrumental in the collapse of these hierarchies. On the other hand, women belonging to the upper caste Darbar community find it easier to gain acceptance in villages, given their caste status. And interestingly, among women they are not judged by Darbar community's rigid norms.

Negotiating, strategising and creating spaces for action.

A Dalit woman belonging to Jharpara was a victim of continuous domestic violence. She lodged a complaint with the Sangathan and decided to return to her natal home near Gandhidham. The Sangathan representatives (mostly upper-caste women) decided to visit her to get details of the case. While they were there they all had a cup of tea and were spotted by a truck driver from a neighbouring village. When they returned to their own village rumours were already rife about their exploits – "women had gone calling on a Dalit house and tea had been drunk - even fish had been eaten". The village men called for a meeting and passed a resolution to close the Jharpara Mahila Mandal. They also initiated a signature campaign on stamp paper with the purpose of collecting signatures from women themselves to extend their support to the resolution. Dire physical threats were also made against women to make them conform. At that time, a meeting had been organised at Bhuj of all the Sangathans. However, women took a strategic decision not to attend the meeting and show open rebellion. A discreet message was passed on to Bhuj to explain their absence.

Women in Jharpara refused to sign the campaign by constantly passing the buck to other women belonging to different communities or Sangathan members living in other villages. Joji Ba, a Darbar woman of Baraiya, categorically refused to sign and insisted she would work at the

Taluka level if she could not work in the village. Unexpected support came from a Darbar elder – Jam dada – who agreed that what women had done was appropriate, as the husband concerned was known to be very abusive. He also averted a showdown by saying it was a Dalit issue and other men should worry when it directly affected the Darbar community. However, in the process he also set up oppositional loyalties based on caste identities. The Dalit community was pressurised to disband the Mandal through their women. Women in turn adopted strategies of resistance - not attending the Bhuj meeting and passing the buck on the signature campaign. For all practical purposes the Mandal maintained a low profile and the stalemate remained.

Events came to a climax when a man needed urgent medical attention and came to the local health worker for help. The workers informed him that she could not provide any services as the Mandal was officially closed. After this incident the men convened a meeting and agreed to let the Mandal function, with a clause that they would seek permission to intervene in sensitive issues.

Thus local women mobilising and organising for social change and justice find that their tasks become more difficult and in turn try to find creative ways to tackle the social divisions between women. A landmark incident in the Mundra Taluka illustrates these dynamics and showcases women's strategies and success in putting up a united front (see box above). These successes also have their limits as in other cases women have been isolated and alienated from their kin and community for having transgressed social boundaries, some even have had to cope with extended ostracism. It is not surprising that transcendence of caste boundaries is evident only in the public sphere and for certain collective occasions, while the distinctions between communities framed by relations of domination and subordination are upheld by women as individuals and members of households and the community. Rakhu admits: "It is not possible to exhibit the same behaviour all the time. When we go out of the village and attend meetings everyone is aware of and yet not bothered about the community to which women belong. It is not important. However at home - family and community norms have to be maintained. We take support from our community and we cannot ignore it when we wish. The same social relationship cannot be extended to non-community individuals and community members alike."

An interesting feature of Kutch is that its volatile drought economy constantly creates new winners and losers - hence militates against the rigidity of caste and class privileges that are evident in rest of the state and country. However, the recent emergence of communal politics in the sensitive border region is transforming religion as the most divisive social entity. It is observed that in places it is also permeating the relations between Samiti members. Incidents, which were formerly seen as a consequence of simple misunderstandings and clash of egos, are now being viewed through a communal lens.

Mahila Mandal – a valuable space to learn, grow and break isolation:

The emergence of the Mahila Mandals and Sangathans has further mitigated some of the tension marking the divisions between women by creating a space for women to interact as well as forge a collective identity. The presence of Mandals and Sangathans has

eroded the traditional isolation of women's lives. Opportunities abound to meet other women outside of family and kin groups and increase women's self-confidence and group solidarity. The solidarity is built through shared interests and finds expression in collective action. The village of Dador had no flourmill and this increased women's burden considerably as they had to either transport the grain to the next town or rely on men to do so. With KMVS support, the Mandal established a flourmill operated by a member. Similarly, Sangathan members of Bavan had to rely on irregular bus service from Naliya as private transportation was beyond their means. The Sangathan organised a rally in front of the State Transport office to ensure regular and reliable service. They were successful in their efforts. Through the process of discussions, planning, and implementation of various activities there has been an emergence of an informed collective voice, which is being taken seriously by the larger society. An active Sangathan member comments:

> "Before we organised ourselves and spoke in a collective voice, we believed everything our husbands told us. They were our link to the outside world. Now we move around in the outside world and have independent opinions. Now, at times men who ask us what we think."

Women realised that their experiences are not isolated and in fact resonate across majority of women's lives. They are also discovering the worthiness of their own peers as role models. These collectives are creating for women, who are already alienated from positions of power and patronage within patrilineal kinship systems, new networks of non-kin relations that have the capacity to sustain women and enhance their bargaining power within households as well as in the larger community. For Hakkima Bai, a Samiti member in Nakhatrana, the Sangathan has been a source of confidence and courage. The friendships of other Sangathan members have made it possible for her to reach where she is now, even paying for her travel to and from Bhuj to make it possible for her to participate in the activities. Similarly for Pradulla Joshi, the legal team of Mundra and the CSJ lawyers are her immediate family as it was they who came to her aid to sort out the legalities of her status as a first wife in order to receive her husband's pension. For Son Ba, it was again the Sangathan that gave her the courage to leave her abusive husband and provided a safety net for her in the interim period. Such stories abound and non-kin relations, facilitated by the Mandals and Sangathans are emerging as a new form of social capital that is giving women the confidence to act beyond the ordinary.

Women's issues and village development issues – blurring boundaries:

Women's mobility has been enhanced and legitimised through participation issues and programme that are perceived as larger village development issues. In several villages women have taken the lead in natural resource conservation and management. This involvement has not only exposed women to new knowledge, it has also initiated visible change in daily lives of men and women. Reclaiming and rejuvenating traditional reservoirs and watershed development has resulted in concrete benefits like reduction in time spent on collecting drinking water. Small technologies, like construction of toilets have gone a long way in improving levels of hygiene and sanitation in these villages. Farm-bunding and check dams have increased productivity. Interestingly, these have not

been mere technical interventions; they have played a role in making women aware of and given them the confidence to address gender inequalities. The training sessions have extended to women the tools – both conceptual and practical – for actual implementation and have given them access to and control over public resources like water that have traditionally been viewed as being under male control.

These environmental initiatives have led to the emergence of new institutions at the village level – the water Samiti and the watershed Samiti – where men and women are encouraged to develop multiple skills and work in tandem with each other for a larger good. Women have learnt new skills in supervision, material management, accounts, measurements, project management, proposal development and networking with Taluka Samitis and government organisations. They have also been exposed to lobbying and advocacy. The enthusiasm exhibited by women spearheading the environmental initiative is infectious and nothing short of a revolution. The environmental program and the collective benefits that it has delivered have been central to women gaining a certain measure of power in society and its acknowledgement, particularly by men. These opportunities have given women visibility and a new identity, created through increasing mobility and exposure to wider societal and developmental processes. The ecological projects have given women the space to move out of the confines of narrowly defined traditions and gain legitimacy to raise village level issues.

> "I am in a hurry to learn. As a leader I have gained some skills in accounts but I need to acquire more knowledge and skills. Earlier, my home was my universe. Now the village has become a part of my world. I, along with my colleagues, am thinking of new agricultural experiments. The focus of our Mahila Mandal has shifted from handicrafts. We have plans of giving our Mahila Mandal a profile that reflects our environmental concerns. I have also learned to interact with men and engage in negotiations and succeeded in convincing them to our viewpoint. But men do think differently from us." (Sangathan leader quoted in Ramaswamy, 1998)

> "Earlier my life was confined to four walls of my home and looking after cattle. Now everything has changed. I am busy disbursing payments every 15 days to 65 workers and I am confident that I can manage much more work." (Water Samiti member quoted in Ramaswamy. 1998)

> "Participating in the environmental programme has meant that I am capable of doing something for the larger good of the community. It has involved learning new managerial and financial skills and shouldering responsibilities. People have started looking upon me as a village leader. I am the one disseminating information. I have gained the confidence to deal with financial institutions like banks and ask questions when in doubt. One time I was unsure about the cashing validity of a post-dated check. While earlier I would have cringed rather than ask questions - now I had no hesitation in asking. I also get prompt replies because the functionaries are acquainted with me as the Sangathan has established a presence in the area." (Rakku, Watershed Samiti, Khari, 2000)

From an exclusive focus on women to working with men:

The environment unit also has the distinction of integrating men into implementation committees. It was a strategic decision as natural resources have traditionally been considered an integral part of their patrimony. Men have begun accepting the legitimacy of KMVS, viewing women as capable individuals, and also voicing their willingness to work with them for the overall development of the village. Subsequently KMVS is not viewed as an organisation whose mission is to wreck homes – a stereotype that all women organisations are susceptible to.

In Laiyari, both men and women together are responsible for consolidating the Sangathan in the village through their participation in the environment programme. Women candidly say that they could not have done it "without men's support – if not all men, at least key men in the village". Men too feel the same way and working with women has changed men's perceptions of women – "It was the environment work that kindled our curiosity and brought us closer to women's perspectives, especially their holistic understanding of nature. And through this exposure we developed a better understanding of the Sangathan and KMVS". Another man commented:

> "Initially, we saw 'women's participation' as the condition imposed by KMVS and Sahjeevan for organising training and extending funds. Gradually through exposure we realised and acknowledged women's capabilities - financial management, labour on site and negotiation skills with the district authorities. Our earlier scepticism about women's ability to engage in was gradually replaced by a confidence in their abilities."

Women were enthusiastic, yet afraid of failure. They strategically understood the need for men's support to in tackling issues of land and water. Khari and Laiyari watershed projects were instrumental in the generation of a gender debate in these villages and this gave a further impetus to the larger process of women's empowerment. On the other hand, KMVS is aware that the involvement of young men could also be viewed as symptomatic of increasing unemployment and hence there is a need to develop a concrete plan of action to integrate them.

Understanding and managing caste and community tensions:

Working on land and water in a drought prone economy has lead to intensification of caste tensions – particularly the marginalisation of the weaker communities, Harijans in Khari and the Kolis in Laiyari, in the distribution of environmental benefits. This raised several questions. How can the Sangathan manage factionalism based on caste? How can the Sangathan empower people who are located on the margins? More importantly, how can they deal with tension between traditional leadership and the new leaders? Although the involvement of villagers with diverse backgrounds is a critical input to the success of such schemes, negotiating consensus amidst plurality of interests requires time and varied skills, and strategies (Ramaswamy, 1998). In the larger struggle this could prove to be limiting factor if women get caught between the crossfire of divisive loyalties of caste and class community. Instances abound where women who are active in the environmental programme have been alienated from their own kin and community and at

times also face periods of social ostracism. In other cases, as in the construction of plastic line tank in Lakhpat, Ahir men confined their women's role to mere approval of the design provided by an expert. However, it is also a stark reality and cannot be dismissed. In Laiyari, Allabachai managed to bring one group together to implement its watershed scheme and this has been partly possible because she managed to convince a few key male leaders to lend their support. The same could not be said for Khari where the Samiti members were dragged to court on false charges of misappropriation of funds and work suffered.

Environmental initiatives have undoubtedly played a critical role in empowering the Sangathan and enhancing its legitimacy among both men and women. It has highlighted contradictions that mark the process of women's empowerment and shed light on the indeterminate and contingent nature of social change. Women involved in such programmes admit that while these initiatives openly challenges traditional notions of women's work, gender dichotomies also creep into management and implementation of projects. Women tend to be to be more active in drinking water and small technologies while men manage watershed projects. And when women do participate in the latter, they take charge of farm treatment and waste-weir. Men are also more visible in large projects like percolation tanks and check dams. Men also view the increasing legitimacy of women in environment programmes as a necessary (though subtle) condition for their own participation. As a result they cannot wish women away. Women themselves are ambivalent about how best to negotiate such complex relationships. What propels them is their belief that overall village development issues should not and cannot be ignored.

Further, despite continuous dialogue on gender relations, several new (and some not so new) myths are also being invented, namely: women work collectively while men are individualistic and women are less corruptible. The danger in these myths becoming truisms is that they will end up naturalising women's abilities and potentially detracting from the political significance of women's participation in land and water issues. There is also a growing discomfort, at least among the KMVS executive team that women are primarily involved in implementation of development schemes and their engagement with struggle for gender justice, social justice and equality is gradually taking a back seat. For example, while their work has created a space for dialogue on gender relations they have remained silent on land rights of women. The fact remains that female ownership of land is still a non-issue.

Access to and control over income – the dynamics of economic empowerment:

In the last ten years KMVS has consciously refrained from an exclusive focus on income generation and economic empowerment. While it recognises the importance of steady income in poor households, as we have seen in the preceding sections, it has balanced economic activity with non-economic activities. Handicrafts and the SCP program provide the mainstay of their economic programme. According to a recent impact assessment survey done by KMVS, 93% of women craft workers reported an annual increase of Rupees 5000, the remaining reported up to Rupees 10,000. They also reported an increase in their ability to save, 8% reported saving Rupees 50 per month, 12%

between Rupees 26-50, and the rest between Rs. 10-25 per month. The ratio of production loans to emergency consumption loans as also been changing, it now stands at 2:1. Several members have borrowed in the range of Rs 15,000 to 75,000 and almost all of them are repaying in regular monthly instalments.

Is this change a result of economic programmes alone? It is now acknowledged that indebtedness has been the bane of the rural and urban poor and they trapped in vicious cycle of debt and poverty in a range of circumstances. Access to healthcare services and expenditure on private medical care is among the major causes. Similarly, low productivity of land, lack of irrigation and the virtual absence of non-farm employment lead to greater impoverishment of the poor. In the last ten years almost every intervention – economic or otherwise – has contributed to improvement in the quality of life of Sangathan members and their families. The Sangathan and a range of related activities have also been a source of income. 44 out of the 348 women surveyed indicated that they received a regular income from Sangathan in their role as office bearers. The others received honorariums for services delivered – midwife, teacher and health worker. Simultaneously, engagement with the public distribution system (ration shops), accessing health care services from the PHC and private trusts, accessing pensions and other welfare schemes from the government – all these have contributed to economic well-being. While they may not have become prosperous, their work has provided them with a safety net.

This enhanced income and concrete economic benefits have been crucial for women in gaining male approval and acceptance for participation in Sangathan activities – evidence of material benefits helps maintain domestic peace. Hawaben admits:

"When it all began we were caught in the drought-generated poverty trap. Working in handicraft was important as it meant raising our households' income. … Men were very supportive and even agreed to accompany us for the quilt exhibition in Delhi – primarily because of the money. However, when the Mandals began to talk about educating girls and about involving women in the environmental programme – there was resistance from the men. Over time and with the introduction of the SCP, resistance has diminished."

Ghoraben's husband did not want her to join the Mahila Mandal. He become more supportive only because she is now in a position to earn more through the Sangathan than she did when she supplied to the middlemen. As a leather worker, Ghoraben's husband earns on an average Rs. 200-300 per month. Ghoraben's income is necessary for the survival of the household. Women have used this as a lever to strategically garner support and approval from men folk in their family. It is so much easier to justify your leaving the house and participating in activities hen you bring money home.

Women acknowledge that there is tension between the ordinary members and paid functionaries of the Sangathan. According to Niya, these tensions surface when ordinary members are urged by the functionaries to invest more time in collective processes. They often respond by saying - "You do it, you get paid for it. Nobody pays

me. I don't have the time. I also have a home to take care of." These sentiments probably explain the resounding success of the savings programme in all the 4 Talukas. The recent survey also points out that women feel that the lack of a strong income-generation programme is a weakness of the Sangathan. Therefore any attempt to give less importance to income generation and economic empowerment invariably raised the issue of accountability to women members and articulation of their needs, as being different from the felt needs of social activists and rural animators.

Credit and productive assets:

Gaining access to income is relatively straightforward as compared to establishing control over one's income. A quick look at the internal dynamics of income allocation within households reveal that most households practise some form of income pooling with the women being in control over the money used for daily household use while men controlled production expenditure. Formerly, only men were responsible for buying goods in the market. However with increased mobility women also purchase independently. Conversations reveal that women rarely consciously separate their own income and assets from the rest of the household. While they feel they have greater control over the money they save (rather than earn and spend on a daily basis); they also know that one medical emergency can wipe out their entire savings.

The survey reveals some interesting facts about decision making on loans – 36% of women said they made the decision to take a loan; 16% reported that their husband made the decision and 38% reported the decision was taken jointly. The data assets also reveal an interesting picture - 43% of the households prefer to keep the savings as money in the Sangathan, 13% purchased luxury goods, 20% invested in a pucca house, 4% used it to buy land and 12% invested in jewellery. Majority of women say that since only women who are eligible for loans from the Sangathan programme, this simple reality has elevated their status in their family – even if they have not accessed this facility.

A disturbing trend revealed through informal discussions is the rising incidence of dowry and women applying for loans to pay for their daughters' dowries, including jewellery. Given easy availability of loans at fair interest rates, Niyamat (a Samiti member from Pachcham) observed - "More and more young women are now putting pressure on their mothers to take loans to provide for elaborate dowries. Parents are willing to do so because it is their way of ensuring their daughter's security". This disturbing trend has galvanised some women to take this up as an issue and publicise the problem of dowry and related deaths in the community. Efforts are also underway to tackle the issue of child marriage. More and more women are asserting their rights as mothers to decide on the suitability of the proposed match for their daughters. Earlier on marriage decisions were a male prerogative reflecting kin group and family considerations, nowadays efforts are being made to focus on suitability of the boy and compatibility of the couple.

As we have seen in the preceding sections, women's participation in economic activity, including wage labour is defined by cultural norms as well as their caste / class location in the larger social structure. Most poor women engage in agricultural wage labour and work in drought relief sites. While Sangathan members agree that their work may not

have made a significant impact on wage rates in the area, it has certainly created circumstances that have contributed to women's increased agency as a worker. A Sangathan member pointed out:

> "Women working on drought sites are more aware of their rights now and demand fair wages similar to men. … Working on Sangathan sponsored environmental sites has exposed them to how labour is measured in terms of earth digging and they expect the same fairness to be exhibited on the state sites. … Women are also raising their voice against corruption rampant in drought schemes and demanding more accountability from the contractors operating these sites."

When women march ahead, are girls left behind?

The work of the Sangathan has also opened up new avenues for employment – as development workers and paraprofessionals. A senior Samiti member avers that now women can aspire to become a trained midwife, a village health worker or a teacher – and there are local role models who provide women and girls with encouragement. Ironically, while women have been busy making their presence felt in the public sphere, their domestic responsibilities have fallen on their young daughters and are adding to their existent burden. This has led some men to articulate their concern and was raised in a Sangathan meeting in Pachcham during our visit. Although some men have started participating in domestic chores, it is done grudgingly and here again enhanced household income helps to justify masculine responsibility for household chores. Women also say that they feel uncomfortable watching men do what has traditionally been seen as their work. Women's silence on the issue of overloading their daughters could perhaps be viewed as a strategic silence, since delegation domestic work to daughters also averts direct confrontations over the issue with men. This, women admit, could be detrimental in the long run. The silence framing this issue can also partly explain earlier apathy exhibited by the community towards the success of the existing adolescent education centres.

The Kutch region has traditionally had a history of exclusion of women / girls from education. A drought economy further intensified this exclusion. The economic opportunity costs of schooling young girls are viewed as being very high and the learning centres are the first to cease operating at the first hint of an economic crisis – be it a drought or the increased demand for female labour during agricultural season. Education has often been set up by some as the veritable straw man and blamed for all the non-conformist actions of adolescent girls. The picture is further complicated by the extant heterogeneity of groups and their differing perceptions on girls' education – Darbar and Muslim community tending to be more conservative in their outlook as opposed to other groups. During a review and reflection session done in 1995, one Sangathan leader succinctly said - "We have the will for ourselves but not for our girls." Consequently the attitude towards adolescent girls education is " If KMVS is keen on it then they should run it" – practically implying that the Sangathan itself has little time for it.

The silver lining is that this attitude is changing and the overall climate for primary education, including the education of adolescent girls, is more positive today that it was

five years back. Unlike a decade ago, there is more enthusiasm among men and women. This transformation could partly be explained by the overall improvement in the economic situation of Sangathan members and their families. In particular, improvement in availability of drinking water has made a difference in the lives of adolescent girls. This is not a universal trend and apathy towards girls' education still abounds in the embroidery blocks of Pachcham and Abdasa. Despite these difficulties, KMVS is working to open 30 centres this year (2000).

Balancing preventive health education with curative services:

The KMVS health campaign has been very effective in making women aware of their own and their family's health needs. Women have been trained as paramedical workers and midwives. They have initiated a local health information campaign to sensitise women and the larger community to diverse issues like nutrition, reproduction, diseases, and physiology. The effort has also been effective in creating a local lobby to demand services and hold the government service providers accountable. They have also forged innovative collaboration with the local PHCs. All these activities have played an important role in granting legitimacy to women who have been stepping out and playing leadership roles.

Parma is a trained 'dai'. She has been involved with the health programme in Pachcham. She recalls how a man in her adoptive village was completely against her occupying any position of leadership and constantly taunting her to return to her own village and not meddle in the affairs of another village. When Parma arranged for his medical treatment in Ahmedabad through the Sangathan network, he changed his opinion. Instances like this abound. Given the poor health care infrastructure in Kutch, the larger network of the Sangathan and their ability to reach out to and access help from outside has also contributed to the enhanced status of Sangathan members. The exigencies of large-scale male migration and women's increased ability to deal with sickness and disease in the family are also making the larger community look at women's increasing physical mobility with charitable eyes.

Women's reproductive health and wellbeing in Kutch is rather poor. High fertility rate is taking its toll of women's bodies through yearly pregnancies marking their childbearing years. This has been further exacerbated by the norm of early marriage. Family planning issues have not been raised directly, even though they have been indirectly addressed through concern over women's reproductive health. Rakku has been married for 13 years. Out of thirteen pregnancies only 6 children survive. She is very active in the watershed Samiti of Khari and yet she confesses that she has no control over her own body. She comments:

> "I had the confidence to initiate important work in the village and yet did not have the confidence to control the number of children I wanted. Initially, I was hesitant to bring it up in a public space like the Mandal. I was also afraid to undergo an operation lest it should further jeopardise my health – I had heard too many stories. I went on the pill but the side effects were ruining my body. I was also not in a position to insist

on male contraception. If I had the information and the confidence then, which I have now – things could have been different."

KMVS's reproductive health programme is still in a nascent stage. There have been efforts to register every pregnancy, ensure pre-natal check-ups and educate women about the need for adequate nutrition. They have also informally linked up with government, private and charitable trust hospitals for care during complicated pregnancies. In the last two years linkages with Bhojai Saryodaya Trust has been very successful in creating the awareness among women for regular gynaecological check ups. For a region lacking in health infrastructure, so far 575 women have been examined, 33 cases of prolapsed uterus operated upon, and 17 cases of suspected cancer under observation. Parma was one of the women selected to go to Bombay to take training on women related cancer. Recounting her experience she said –

" This was the most significant exposure for me. After I came back from Bombay, I participated in the diagnostic camp organised in Pachcham. I managed to mobilise 22 women who were suffering from acute prolapsed uterus to consent to being operated upon. The fact that I was able to help these women and at the same time make such an intimate issue a source of public concern was a very satisfying experience."

This collaboration was also significant as it made it possible for women taking the initiative to ask for a gynaecological check up and even persuaded their husbands to accompany them. This has also provided a strategic forum to address the issue of prolapsed uterus at the community level and to communicate that it is caused by repeated pregnancies and hence can be prevented.

Social justice and legal redressal:

Another significant dimension of KMVS's work is the effort to demystify laws and create mechanisms for legal redressal – an aspect that is usually seen as being important in an urban context and missing from a rural agenda. The efforts of KMVS and the Sangathan have made it possible to publicise domestic violence and unnatural deaths among young women as a societal concern. This has given women the confidence to verbalise their experiences and seek help. The simple act of acknowledging violence as a social issue and not as a personal problem is a liberating experience for women. The actual presence of a legal cell and its resources has enabled the Sangathan to move beyond rhetoric and enable women like Son Ba to reclaim their lives and emerge as stronger individuals.

Son Ba – a profile

Son Ba of Jharpara, Mundra is now 40 years, belongs to the Gadvi community and has been married for 17 years. Her marriage was a nightmare as her husband was very abusive. She was constantly moving between her natal and marital home to alternatively escape abuse and save her marriage. Her husband was having an extra-marital affair and openly living with another woman. Son Ba used to work in the fields and support her children. She was prevented from sending her daughters to school. She often contemplated suicide.

In 1993-94 CSJ organised a legal camp on violence. Among the outcomes of this camp was a message that women should not consider suicide as the only alternative in a abusive situation and that there are centres that can help them. Son Ba reached out to the legal team in Mundra and met the lawyer and presented her story. She also filed a case, but was also keen to explore out of court settlement to avoid alienating her natal family. Given the situation, she could not avoid a court battle and eventually she won the case. This was a turning point and as she got interested in legal work. She started sitting with the legal team, purely on a voluntary basis. This exposure changed her and her trips to the court to collect her maintenance were no longer shrouded in fear and secrecy, she went there with her head held high, as a right.

She then worked as a volunteer and participated in legal training workshops. Despite having no formal education she has learnt to read and write. The disapproval of her natal family has partially alleviated by her new status. There are three lawyers from her community in the village. However women still prefer to come to her because she does not charge any fees and empathises with them. Her association with the Sangathan (especially its legal work and anti alcohol campaign) has bolstered her reputation. The Sangathan is her family now and she is now in the forefront of a campaign against domestic violence in her community.

Rama Rao[14] reviewed the work of the legal unit in 1997. She attributes the sudden influx of cases pertaining to familial discontent to the growing awareness among women about their rights and confidence to negotiate and discuss "personal" issues in the "public" sphere, including the unwillingness or inability of their parents to reach out in times of need. Growing awareness and trust in the Sangathan and that the legal cell run by local women has also contribute to this public expression. Rao reports that the majority of cases are resolved through counselling, resulting in reconciliation. The process allows for the space to redefine gender relationships and this has been an empowering experience for women. Most complaints of violence come from women who are in the age group of 18-25. A plausible explanation for this could be that these women are in the early years of marriage and are more vulnerable as they have not yet gained a foothold or established themselves within the village social networks. Violence is also more pronounced in certain communities and legal workers also report a strong correlation between violence and dowry demands.

It is also interesting to note that very few women take recourse to IPC 498A – laws pertaining to harassment and torture – even though lawyers effectively use it as a threat to establish women's security in the family. Cases that have culminated in divorce or separation have been strident in their demands for maintenance and it has been have received both under Cr. PC 125 and under the clause of lump-sum payment on divorce.

[14] The discussion on domestic violence is partly based on Rama Rao's report.

The legal initiative has been able to use existing laws - especially those pertaining to maintenance. However, one does need to keep in mind that under the existing statutes the awarded sums are negligible and there is a high degree of default. The follow-up procedure in cases of default is rather cumbersome and the Sangathan does not have a mechanism in place to monitor this.

Further, the increasing visibility of cases of marital conflict cannot be simplistically interpreted as a desire on part of women to separate from a violent home or as an indication of women's growing autonomy. Similarly domestic violence needs to be viewed within the matrix of larger questions and issues, which may be case specific. What does the presence of children, attitude of natal family (parents often refuse to litigate in cases of homicide and suicide), lack of economic resources, and lack of alternatives have to do with majority of decisions individual women take? How do increased social tensions, unmet aspirations, economic crises and increasing awareness among women mediate the incidence of violence? What is the role of dowry in abetting violence? How do you deal with violence perpetrated by women in positions of power? Hence issues of violence cannot be only about individual women or cases. It is a shared and collective reality that also needs to be addressed by the community at large.

Recognising the need to initiate attitudinal change, the Sangathan is making efforts to move beyond seeking "case" solutions and take up the issue of violence within the larger community. They are attempting to initiate sustained discussions at the community level by sharing the experiences of the legal cell and forcing people to look at the issue as a social problem, without being judgmental or prescriptive. The Mundra Sangathan organised mass campaigns on suicide, harassment and alcoholism and efforts are specifically being undertaken to convince parents to take up litigation in cases of unnatural deaths of daughters. A disturbing observation has been the prevailing apathy of parents regarding the violence their daughters are facing. This in turn is obstructing the process of legal redressal. Violence is also very context and community specific and does not lend itself to generalisable solutions. Studies are being undertaken of specific community practices to document and understand customs and traditions that hinder women's legal standing. For instance, the Gadvi community is more accepting of desertion, violence and second marriages, which is detrimental to women's status.

Increasing alcoholism is also encouraging violence and recently in March 2000 the Mundra Sangathan organised a massive anti-alcohol rally which was attended by community leaders – both men and women. A consequence of this rally has been the creation of the Samaj Kranti Samiti to tackle social issues like alcoholism and violence in the villages. It is encouraging to observe that despite the fact that some of the above initiatives confront masculine privilege directly, a new sensibility seems to be emerging among the men that the Sangathan is not anti-men or simply interested in destroying homes. Both men and women are understood as being accountable for social atrocities and hence feel the need to work together to seek solutions. Further the campaign to raise awareness among the natal families of women who are victims of violence has also been crucial in creating a social safety net for women.

Samaj Kranti Samiti

In April 1999, Bhadreshwar witnessed the unnatural deaths of 2 women. The Sangathan organised a rally to create public awareness regarding these incidents. The Mundra legal cell's investigation into domestic violence and unnatural deaths of young women reported that alcoholism among men was a problem in most of the cases alcoholism. Further the legal cell also identified some acute pockets - Lakhpat, Virania, Zarpara, Siracha, Lafra, Vavar, Baraya, Bhadreshwar - where large quantities of local alcohol is brewed and consumed. Despite prohibition, the concerned authorities turn a blind eye to production and consumption of alcohol. Unfortunately, it is the very poor, those below the poverty line, who resort to local alcohol.

The Mundra Sangathan called an emergency meeting in October in which 500 women participated (including women from the other Talukas) and unanimously agreed to stage a rally to draw attention to this problem. They started from Mundra market and marched to police station carrying placards and shouting slogans. The rally culminated in a public meeting and women called upon the police to assist them in their anti-alcohol campaign. 5 jeeps full of women escorted by the police raided local village distillery. Having been forewarned, the bootleggers escaped. This rally was a landmark as it was the first time Darbar women participated in a public rally. The Sangathan took a decision to keep their anti-alcohol struggle alive.

In February 2000 the Mundra Sangathan held a meeting to strategise on a mass anti-alcohol campaign and more specifically how to seek the help of men and convince people of the evils of alcoholism. They took the following decision:

- Monthly meetings to take stock and also share experiences of anti-arrack struggle across the country.
- Collect information on local distilleries and work with the police and excise to keep local consumption and production of alcohol in check.
- Lobby and work towards gaining the support of men before taking public action. To this end, draw up a list of supportive men in the area who can be relied upon to provide support.

Slowly men from the area (covering 30 villages) came forward with support and even agreed to join the movement. Women and men have together set up a committee called 'Samaj Kranti Samiti" to take up the responsibility of steering the movement. Inspired by the Mundra Sangathan, Abdasa Sangathan has also decided to start an anti-alcohol campaign in their area. All the Talukas congregated on March 27 to host a cultural programme to raise awareness. This was followed by a rally in Naliya where about 800 women participated. They presented a petition to the local authorities demanding:

- Establishment of a Mahila Suraksha Dal in the district;
- Ensure that the police take immediate action in cases of violence or alcohol related crimes.
- Ensure communication between the village and the police station..
- Regular coordination between excise and police department with the Sangathan.
- Take measures to ensure that materials used for alcohol production are not available through the PDS.

The exposure to legal training has made women aware of their legal rights and that these carry the mandate of enforceability and hence people/institutions that violate them can be held accountable. It has allowed for the demystification of the legal and judiciary set-up and eroded the fear of police from people's psyche. These developments have given

women the confidence to tackle sensitive issues that openly challenge patriarchal privilege and also have the potential to create and strengthen divisions between men and women. The confidence, according to the participants, is also possible at this point because, "The Sangathan has established its presence in the Taluka through other activities and the benefits have been tangible for the village. The sincerity of the Sangathan members is no longer in doubt. … Women have demonstrated that they want to work with men rather than against them". This is at times also a source of conflict as some women are more flexible and see a role for men while others tend to see their role only in implementation – the oft-repeated question being, "Why do we have to call them to our meetings when we were never accorded the same privilege?" Yet other women feel they need to integrate men in non-masculine sectors – health and legal.

The recent rally has energised the whole process of empowerment in the region. An interesting consequence of the presence of a legal cell and its treatment of domestic violence has been the re-introduction of the "struggle" mode and reinvigoration of the "movement" aspect of women's empowerment. Sushma Iyengar candidly remarks that the initial fervour of mobilisation has given way to strategies of planning and implementation (the requirements for sustaining their handicraft, environment, and savings & credit programme) and this had injected a certain degree of inertia among women regarding their strategies of work. However, the overall issue of tackling domestic violence defies such an antiseptic approach and requires the linking of the personal to the political, social and the economic realm. Rallies and campaigns have made a comeback and mass meetings have created spaces for dialogue between men and women as a community. This is clearly evident in the recent anti-alcohol and domestic violence rally in Mundra and the creation of the Samaj Kranti Samiti by concerned citizens mentioned above.

The Taluka Sangathans have strategically used their position of strength (derived through savings and credit, environment, and handicrafts) to address controversial issue like domestic violence. Yet the framing of these issues within the context of women's issues has inevitably denied them the space and legitimacy to deal with other issues of equal importance – women's land rights and other issues of public interest – and in the process they are losing the opportunity to build their capabilities to deal with these issues. Women, in the long run, need to actively take up complex issues of land rights and other atrocities faced by marginal groups despite they being mired in caste and class politics. Yet, at the same time Sangathans also need to be constantly aware, so that in the process they do not get undermined by the larger divisive politics of caste and class and compromise their own integrity.

Women's participation in local self-government:

The 73rd constitutional amendment has made it possible for women to cast a much wider net of influence and empower themselves by creating conduits to access and control local decision-making fora and other political spaces. The visible effects of the KMVS panchayat cell are evident in the emergence of empowered Sarpanches like Nageshwariben (see box chapter 2) who are positive role models. Sarpanches are motivated to carry on the process of empowerment initiated by KMVS in their own

villages thus encouraging a cascade effect in the area. Working with the elected representatives has also been instrumental in expanding the area of influence of the existing Sangathan leaders, who had till recently refrained from forging close linkages with the Panchayat because they were seen as being dominated by men. There was a feeling that such linkages with local political bodies might compromise the Sangathans' integrity. This attitude is fast changing and Sangathan leaders are now excited about exploring possibilities of working with the Panchayat, establishing local structures of accountability and creating gender-sensitive structures of local governance. They are strategising about institutional collaborations instead of limiting their interaction to individual. This effort has been greatly facilitated by the radio programme on Mahila Sarpanches, which has found a large appreciative audience in the region (see box on Kunjal Panje Kutchji in chapter 2). There is also a growing assertion of women as political leaders and many of the Sangathan leaders feel confident about contesting the forthcoming elections. As a part of a statewide campaign initiated by WGWI-G, Sarpanches have also been proactive in the task of identifying potential beneficiaries of government social security schemes – old age and widow pensions. It is also reported that in the past about Rs. 8-10 Crore of allocated state funds lapsed because of lack of information on schemes at the ground level.

Nageshriben – a profile

Nageshriben is the Mahila Sarpanch of Jarpara Panchayat. Her proxy candidature ensured that she remained only a figurehead till 1997 when she was identified and selected by the Panchayat unit to undergo long-term training in leadership development and local governance. In November 1998, she received information about government plans regarding the use of village grazing land for industrial development. She brought the information to KMVS who helped her to critically assess the various aspects of the said project. She then organised a 1200 strong Gram Sabha to understand the possible implications of the proposed activities on the village economy. She mobilised a group of villagers and formed a committee to raise the issue with local officials.

On the day of the public hearing of the project, Nageshriben surprised all the stakeholders by effectively articulating the villager's point of view through arguments, backed by facts and figures. She was successful in obtaining a stay on the clearance of the project, earning the respect of the villagers in the process. This impressive display of leadership has made her a source of inspiration for the other Mahila Sarpanches in the area. The story of Nageshriben is one of a woman's discoveries of her own capabilities and of the critical role that development of leadership plays in strengthening of rural communities.

Information access and capacity building:

There is no doubt that fundamental to the process of women's empowerment in Kutch has been Sangathan's efforts to build capabilities and access information. This is borne out by the numerous voices in this chapter who have identified "mahiti" as the primary factor in transforming their lives through greater awareness of the world around them. Women are very clear about their need for acquiring information versus conventional literacy, as the former is viewed as being central to their quest for empowerment.

"Education cannot only be about literacy. Reading and writing skills do not make a person aware and conscious about oneself or others. So many men are literate but they are not aware and conscious as we women have become. In order to be relevant education should be about answering questions of daily survival and providing insights into the daily struggle for life. It should teach us how to critically think about what is happening around us – is it good or bad for people?" (Mahila Mandal member, Jamkunaria)

Meghi – a profile

Meghi, who lives in village Havai (Bhuj Taluka) belongs to the Ahir community. She does not have any formal education. Meghi recalls wistfully that her maternal uncle who was a couple of years older and went to school while she was denied that privilege. Her parents worked while she minded her younger sister and then she started working as a wage labourer at drought relief sites and on farms. Meghi never went to school but her natural curiosity to learn led her to her uncle's books – even if it meant she had to do it on the sly. Her father became a sub-contractor and Meghi started helping him with accounts. After an abortive marriage, Meghi returned to her natal home and again started working on construction sites and relief work.

The curiosity and aspiration to learn that made the young Meghi try to read her Uncle's books is still with her and defines her relationship with the Sangathan. She has been the star member of the UJJAS team since the beginning. She was the first person to be trained in screen-printing. Since the division between newsletter and the commercial screen-printing unit, Meghi heads the latter. Her quest for knowledge and information constantly urges her to attend training workshops – environment and legal. She is an active member in community. Her dream is to learn English and make UJJAS a commercially viable unit and through it extend support to other women.

It cannot be denied that such an educational strategy has avoided undermining the knowledge and skill levels of un-schooled women and creating a dichotomy between "empowered" literate women and vulnerable illiterate women. This strategy has truly created a genuine information revolution on a wide spectrum of issues at the grassroots and instilled confidence in women about their abilities to access as well as act on the information. The success of such an approach has partially been fuelled by the success of UJJAS in communicating to women the power of not only the word but also the idea behind the word. However, education is also not always about long-term goals of empowerment. Women also desire specific information-based education to make incremental shifts in their access to social status and economic power. For instance women would like to know about government schemes available to them so the can take advantage of them and not get duped in the bargain.

"We know that the state has lot of schemes for this area under drought relief. However, with a few exceptions, they are not public knowledge. … Before the Mahila Mandal was formed we used to rely on government touts for information that we rightfully had access to. One agent got a group of 35 women to put their thumbprints on a collective loan – they were all given Rs 200 each. It was only when women started going to the local Grameen Bank that they realised that the actual amount of the loan was Rupees 2000 each and they were still legally liable for returning that

money. Having access to information about government schemes in a transparent manner is also about education." (interview with Niyamat in Pachcham))

The flip side of this information revolution has been the creation of a hierarchy between women who possess information versus those who do not. According to Niya, it is fairly evident to all concerned that "information is a source of power and like any other source there will be individuals who will want to control it and others who will be willing to share it and accordingly there will be a hierarchy – sometimes more and other times less". Most of the women who are active in the Sangathans as functionaries, paraprofessionals, and animators have access to vast bodies of knowledge and the assumption is that these women will encourage a cascade effect in the dissemination of knowledge to every women. However in reality this is not happening. Niya further elaborates:

"When there is a Sangathan meeting the divisions between women become very evident. There are always groups of women – the environmental Samiti, the bachat workers, the Sangathan leaders – who are more dominant. Free exchange of ideas and communication does not happen often… We have no one but ourselves to blame. The presence of the Sangathan has taken away significance from the village Mandal. Since everyone cannot be someone in the Sangathan the Mahila Mandal is often ignored. … I too am guilty of doing the same as a Samiti member. We are so over-burdened and are constantly in the Taluka or in the other villages rather than our own. When I return in the evening I cannot just call a Sangathan meeting to share the information I have. Most of the women have returned from their daily wage labour and are busy with their housework. I end up talking to the men folk who are free. … What is needed is the strengthening of the Mandals through regular meetings at convenient times – even if it means holding the meeting in small groups rather than the whole mandal."

Niya made this comment when we were in a Mahila Mandal meeting where 15 women who had gathered. At that moment somebody came to gave the news that the water supply was on and in a flash the room emptied out – bearing silent testimony to the truth of Niya's words.

Access to intangible resources:

The whole process of empowerment has given women access to intangible resources, improved their self-esteem and self-confidence, and critical thinking skills. They are no longer afraid of approaching government. functionaries and asserting their knowledge and rights. Legal courts and government bureaucracies no longer hold the power to intimidate them – as is clearly evident through Rakku and Nageshwari Ben's testimony in the court. The various opportunities afforded to women to participate in the public sphere has also encouraged the emergence of an 'I' that is unmediated by social relationships – of being a wife, mother, and daughter. Women clearly revel in the fact that "they have come a long way since their initial encounter with KMVS where they were hesitant to interact with strangers to the present where they initiate contact with strangers and you also have strangers coming to meet you by name in the village".

Rakhu – a profile

Rakhu is a slightly built woman, about 35 years of age, belonging to the Ahir community. She is married to the Sarpanch of the village and is a mother of six children – 5 sons and 1 daughter. She is an active member of the environmental Samiti of Pachcham and has worked on watershed development in her own village Khari - one of the earliest village selected by KMVS-Sahjeevan team to experiment and showcase the importance of natural resource management. Her association with KMVS began while she was working on the construction site of the local pond. Priti (currently working with the KMVS-Ujjas team) was the record clerk at the site and she had started a literacy classes for women during the lunch hour. Attendance was purely voluntary. Rakhu was drawn to these classes and these classes were instrumental in motivating and building enthusiasm in Rakhu to take control of her life as well as contribute to the upliftment of the village. At the beginning Rakhu was appointed as a village health worker and was in charge of maintaining the medicine kit.

When Khari was chosen to be the pilot site for environmental initiative, she rediscovered herself. She actively involved herself in the watershed development programme and is now on the environmental implementation Samiti. The process of empowerment has not been easy. On one hand it was easy for Rakhu to personally internalise the Sangathan philosophy of working with truth and ensuring transparency in all activities. However the same could not be said for all actors involved in the field and she learnt this the hard way. In the early phase of watershed work she and other Samiti members did not anticipate the differential benefits this may accord to different people – depending on location and ownership of land. For example, when private land was offered for experimentation by an interested party, they were taken aback when he tried to reclaim it as his private property after the land was regenerated and made productive. Rakhu, along with other members, learnt a valuable lesson - always initiate community work on common property resources, and never on private land.

This resulted in conflict and factional politics – thus undermining the work of the Samiti. Rakhu was accused of embezzling Rupees 60,000. Her personal credibility was completely undermined and she was personally shaken to the core. She stood firm and was supported by her family as well as other villagers. She went to court and gave her own defence – and it was the first time she had spoken in a public venue. The records were checked and the charges cleared by the authorities. This was not the end of story. The other faction spread a rumour that the construction of the dam was not environmentally tenable and might cause flooding. A court case was filed again – this time against the Mahila Mandal. Rakhu was once again asked to present herself in court and she again did an admirable job in explaining why the claim was merely an exercise in rumour-mongering – government schemes at much higher points did not run the risk of causing flooding despite the cheap construction. The judge was impressed with her articulation abilities and set up an independent judicial enquiry that exonerated her.

Her struggle goes on and Rakku is truly one of the most remarkable women leaders of the Sangathan

These sentiments are borne out by the survey that reveals that 98 of women feel they get more respect by society because of their association with the Sangathan, 96 feel that their families respect them more, and 89 feel that they have started taking many more decisions. Women feel that their value has gone up in society, but this was not so always. As an active Samiti member observed:

> "When I joined the Sangathan I was paid Rupees 125 per month. If I had gone to work as a daily agricultural labourer I could have earned Rupees 60 as a daily wage. People openly laughed at me for what I was doing – and yet today those same people respect me for my choice of work because of the facilities that have been made available to the village because of the presence of KMVS."

Women are divided on the opinion whether this "respect" is merely an acceptable term for burdening them with more responsibilities or reflects a genuine change in people's attitudes. In the survey 76 women acknowledged the increased workload and 65 confessed to being stressed out. Some women who clearly see their emergence as a public figure as a source of pride and acknowledge the accompanying work as an occupational hazard. According to Meghi,

> "Because of my prominence in the Sangathan, elders of the Gadvi community to invite me to their meetings. They actually ask me for my input before taking decisions. Earlier aspersions regarding my character have quietly died down. Even my family sees me in a new light. They love me like a daughter but treat me like a son when asking my opinion on things. … All this has also meant that I am always busy and I have acquired a reputation among my family that I never turn up for any social occasion."

However, there are other women who acknowledge this attention as a source of pride but are clearly sceptical whether the change in attitude is genuine or merely expedient. They feel that often people are not willing to bear the responsibility of taking decisions on their own so they use this as a means to transfer the responsibility on someone else and this in the longer run reinforces a culture of dependency on certain key individuals or the Sangathans.

Emerging themes in collective empowerment:

The Sangathan women are remarkably grounded and a down to earth group. After ten years, the four Taluka Sangathans are more or less managed by rural women with the Taluka Samiti handling administrative, mobilisation and logistic responsibilities. While KMVS provides professional inputs for specific activities and programmes, rural women's mobilisation and management of their federation is in the hands of local women leaders. KMVS now has four Sangathan representatives on the governing board of 11 members. They are elected / selected by rural women and represent the four Taluka Sangathans. All the Sangathans have had different programmatic trajectories in response to their specific needs and contexts and thus different programmes are identified with them. In the last couple of years, health, especially the PHC link-up, defined the identity of Pachcham Taluka Sangathan, followed by watershed development. Environment remains the key intervention in Nakhatrana. The legal initiative complemented by drinking water initiatives in Abdasa has framed its identity, while the legal unit along with UJJAS is the Mundra Sangathan crown feather.

The Sangathans are comfortable with their autonomy and their rapidly growing power base. This was clearly evident during a recent meeting of the Taluka Samiti and bank

officers from NABARD, GRAMEEN BANK, and DENA BANK in Bhuj regarding possible refinancing loans. The ease with which the Samiti members were negotiating with the bankers was revealing. One of the Samiti members questioned a banker as to why the bank could not extend a loan to the Sangathan on the basis of its credibility rather than KMVS's. The Sangathan's independent identity has also started being acknowledged by the local men. Initially men would try to dialogue with KMVS staff if they had concerns and now they go to the Sangathan office. Young men in Nakhatrana and Pachcham are active and supportive of women's work in the different areas. Women too are coming to terms with their own power and strategizing on how to use men to further their agenda and cause.

Another dimension of power of the collective is visible in the relationship between the established Samiti members who have already consolidated their positions of power and the new KMVS team members. The new recruits who join KMVS as professionals work under the guidance of KMVS core team and senior Sangathan leaders - thus turning on its head the conventional hierarchy between urban professionals and rural women. The dynamics between young educated professionals in KMVS and the experienced women leaders of the Sangathan is interesting – the rural women are encouraged to determine their agenda and make demands while the urban educated professionals provide technical support.

Apart from the Sangathans and their respective Taluka Samitis and the Mahila Mandals, the other collective actors in the landscape are the activity-based village Samitis relating to water, education, watershed, and the recent Kranti Samaj Samiti. It has been observed by KMVS that the Mahila Mandals – the initial building blocks of KMVS - have been unable to revisit their initial collective enthusiasm and euphoria. This can partly be attributed to the emergence of the Sangathans as well as implementation bodies. This, along with the issue-based groups in the villages has undermined the position of Mahila Mandals as the developmental unit. For instance watershed and water committees are gaining in power in the village. Given their nature of work as well as the fact it also includes key men in the village. In the savings and credit programme women are steadily identifying more with the Sangathan in this activity rather than with the Mahila Mandal - because the latter is not a self-contained savings or lending unit, the Sangathan definitely is. The SCP has been a source of great security to Mahila Mandal members and yet the very design of the scheme has resulted in decreased responsibility towards the banking activities on part of the members at the village level. These dynamics have resulted in the strengthening of the Sangathan and the samitis often at the cost of the Mahila Mandals and are further reinforced by the fact that the former are also more visible actors. While it is true that a singular institution – be it the Mahila Mandal or the Taluka Samiti - cannot respond to all aspects of the social transformation, the challenges that the Sangathans and Samitis face are in forging sustainable linkages with each other and taking the Mahila Mandal along with it. Hopefully the activation of the linkage between the Gram Sabha and the mandal will infuse new vitality.

It is also observed that men and women in the villages are realising the power of the Sangathans and the significance of their role as nodal agencies. There seems to be a

general opinion that villages who are represented at the Sangathan through very visible and active Samiti members tend to better off as opposed to those who lack representation. Thus having a woman selected at the Samiti level is something that all villages aspire to and this creates an atmosphere of competition as the number of Samiti members are limited while the villages are not – especial in the larger blocks. A related issue is how can KMVS ensure the transfer of power between the Sangathan members to usher in a new generation. The last decade has witnessed the emergence and rise to power of a certain cadre of women who now hold key positions in the Sangathans. While the contribution of these women has been immense – is it not in the larger interest of women that they retain their monopoly over the Sangathans? Should the Sangathan think about institutionalising a system of rotating women in these positions – imposing a term limit on Samiti members and trustees? This remains an open question.

Listening to the myriad voices at the grassroots clearly highlights the fact that the heterogeneity of women and communities also leads to significant differences in strategies of empowerment – as a collective as well as individuals. For example the existential situation of Muslim women is quite unique, especially in a communally charged climate. The negotiating strategy adopted by Durbar and Rajput women is different from Dalit women. Recognising these differences and creating space for women to explore options and beat their own path has been a very important aspect of KMVS overall approach. For example women in Mundra and Abdasa Talukas (mostly Dalit, Rajput, Gadvi women) are more militant, speak out openly and do not hesitate to being domestic and community issues to the fore. On the other hand, Muslim women of Nakhatrana and Pachcham adopt a more subtle approach-they negotiate silently, using existing community / family systems to communicate. A casual observer may conclude that Abdasa and Mundra Sangathans are stronger because there are more visible cases, public demonstration of anger and greater militancy. KMVS team has observed that the women of Nakhatrana and Pachcham have really more negotiating power within their community and the family. The complex interplay between different strategies is quite fascinating-counselling, negotiating, exerting pressure through public rallies, taking legal action and filing cases in the court of law and building peer pressure through existing community networks. What is important is that in this entire process KMVS has been able to forge a common identity as a Sangathan - women from different communities and Talukas sit together, discuss strategies and work together.

Despite the hiccups and the contradictions, the verdict is quite clear. Women have clearly benefited from KMVS's presence. They would like KMVS and the Sangathans to spread itself in all the villages, empower every women not just those who are currently involved-and work towards a societal transformation that privileges women's voices and decisions – specifically work on government functionaries who still persist in excluding women.

Conclusion

Women's voices and experiences that form the core of the previous section clearly reveal that empowerment for women has essentially been an exercise in capacity building that relies on diverse strategies on part of women which include acts of assertion, negotiation, manoeuvre, conflict, strategic linkages, as building support systems. This process is not

taking place in a vacuum but is being framed by the larger contradictions that frame gender and other social relations and are revealed through individual women's experiences of agency that enable resistance as well as encourage conformity. Women cannot fight all the battles all the time. They are also not ready to discard traditions altogether - despite being oppressive these traditions also provide security. The exploration highlights several of these contradictory themes and which any process of empowerment needs to acknowledge and addressed.

- Coming to voice and giving voice is integral to the process of empowerment. However, one needs to be careful that we do not end up fetishisizing voice where articulated perceptions are necessarily understood as complete truths. To balance the emphasis on voice we need to explore silence as a feature of the politics of communication (Jackson 1996). For instance, conversations with women in Kutch have tended to focus on public expressions of empowerment while the household seems to have remained beyond the purview of critical analysis. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the aspects of gender inequality that are most invisible and yet are most powerful in determining policy outcomes are hidden within this projected "black box" of the household. One needs to be aware that extant gender relations may actually subvert resources that are being directed towards women. Nor does facilitating women's access to resources translate into women's direct control over how these resources are used (Kabeer 1994). Further, decision-making as an index of power relations has limited use. In lots of cases the important person may not be the one who makes the decision - but the one who influences it, the one who can delegate it to the other spouse and has the power to veto it or pass it, and whose interests the outcome serves. How do we politicise women's understanding of gender relations without engaging in open conflict and framing the issue in reductive and oppositional terms – men vs. women?
- A related concern is – how do we conceptualise women's interests? Women's interests are not universal but are rooted in specific historical contexts. Women's multiple identities lead to a very vexed notion of interests which are further influenced by the interests of the members of the households. We need to understand that in targeting women are we subverting existing gender relations and enhancing their status or are we undermining familial and community privileges that women were traditionally entitled to, hence making them more vulnerable.
- Niya's analysis has highlighted and problematised another aspect of empowerment that is usually seen as being beyond the pale of criticism – namely participation. The emphasis of participation has its own costs. Research has shown that women who participate are usually better off women, less subject to norms of gender subordination and family responsibilities, and older women past child-bearing age. Often women's unequal access to resources, burden of unpaid work, limited mobility and autonomy circumscribe their inclination for participation as the latter requires increased time and resources. High cost of participation and low tangible benefits may often mean that the poorest are left out. Can we take KMVS's withdrawal from Lakhpat in 1997 as a reflection of

this? Lakhpat's women's insistence on home-based production – can it be about their inability to create time and do women in KMVS villages who are not members have similar compulsions? How do we plan for this?

Chapter IV

Linkages and networking[15]

Grassroots organisations engaged in development work build alliances with a range of governmental, donor and voluntary organisations. In the early stages, organisations tend to be inward looking and forge relationships with a limited number of agencies. As they mature and grow, organisations are gradually drawn into varied networks and campaigns. They start playing a key role in agenda setting and advocacy, especially in their own area of specialisation. Networking is difficult business. Striking the right balance between meaningful and mutually reinforcing partnerships and national and international networking is not easy. In the last ten years – especially during the UN conferences on population and development in Cairo, the women's conference in Beijing, the environment conference in Rio and the social development summit in Copenhagen- several grassroots groups were catapulted into the heady world of international conferences. Those who had their feet firmly rooted on the ground were able to maintain a balance. However, there are examples of organisations loosing touch with ground situations and drawing sustenance from networks. This in turn has attracted attention of political formations and also the government. In the last decade the NGO community has come under a lot of criticism on the issues of networking which remains sensitive – especially in the government and among political parties. This has taken a disturbing turn in the Dang region of Gujarat and also the tribal areas of Orissa. It is in this larger political context that this chapter on linkages and networking is located. Identifying and acknowledging friends and supporters is therefore necessary in the interest of transparency.

Linkages with Government:

Since inception KMVS has worked closely with the government – Gujarat State Handicrafts Development Board, Commissioner for Women and Child Development, Women's Development Corporation, Department of Rural Development, CAPART, Department of Education (GOI), Health Department, Water and Sanitation, NABARD, SIDBI, Zilla Panchayat (especially DDO, DHO) etc. It has also worked at different levels – at the village and Taluka level with field functionaries of the government, at the district, state and at the national level. These relationships were informed by KMVS's philosophy of critical yet constructive dialogue and cooperation. Though many of the details have been covered in earlier chapters, the moot point is that KMVS has invested time and human resources in building bridges between rural women and the government machinery. It has tried to enhance women's access to resources. In this process it has strategically used dialogue, petitioning, support, protest and collaboration to maintain gentle pressure on the system to deliver what it is supposed to.

[15] This is an analytical overview. Programmatic details are given in Chapter 2.

How did it all begin? KMVS started with the Commissioner for Women and Child Development of the Government of Gujarat as the Chairperson and Trustee. At that time the organisation forged a close relationship with Gujarat State Handicraft Development Corporation. While KMVS was engaged in familiarising itself with the area and working with women artisans, the design and marketing inputs were being provided by GSHDC. This mutually supportive relationship gave KMVS the space to concentrate on building the organisation. It was also fortunate that among the first large-scale projects of KMVS was the one supported by the Border Area Development Programme of the Department of Education, MHRD, GOI (1990-94). Therefore, in the first three to four years, KMVS had the space and the freedom to build its foundation. These were the formative years and the space it got at this crucial period moulded its approach to the government and to the larger development community.

After 1993 KMVS gradually built linkages with the Department of Rural Development around DWCRA (now part of Suvarna Jayanti Gram Swaraj Yojana), watershed management and other schemes of the government. Simultaneously it was also able to strike a working relationship with the Zilla Panchayat, District Development Office and the District Medical and Health Officer. These relationships continue to be important – especially in negotiating a space for action and advocacy. Accessing pension and schemes for old people, widows and other people in difficult circumstances became possible. During discussions with the PHC Medical Officer in Khadwa in Pachcham it emerged that the relationship was mutually beneficial – the PHC doctor was able to fulfil his targets and rural women were able to access services[16].

Over the years KMVS has been able to strike a balance between constructive criticism, protest and collaboration. It believes that the government is not a monolith and like in civil society it is composed of people with different views, working style, priorities etc. As a result, KMVS does not dismiss any institution or any individual – it tries to strike a rapport and put its best foot forward. This non-confrontational approach seems to have worked. Notwithstanding this observation, KMVS is also in the forefront on struggle for transparency and accountability. Lets take the most recent cyclone that devastated the Kutch coastline. In the aftermath of the 1998 cyclone, KMVS along with a few other organisations (VRTI and Sahjeevan) took the initiative to respond to not just immediate relief but rehabilitation. Initially 51 NGOs responded but finally 15-20 NGOs stayed on to work together. After the immediate relief work was streamlined, KMVS involved the Sangathan in the survey of the region – loss of property, land (salination), cattle etc. This data base was accepted by the government as being authentic (not partisan) and relief was calculated on this database. The Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan emerged out of this work and is now focusing on building a database of all the villages (right down to the household level) with the help of local youth. It is planning to work towards better disaster preparedness and link the Sangathans and NGOs who are part of this network to the government and financial institutions like NABARD. It is now trying to work towards a village based drought-proofing programme, which again seeks to involve local organisations (including business) and the government.

[16] Also see Chapter 2, section on Environment.

Linkages with other non-governmental organisations:

Jan Vikas, as the sponsor organisation, played an instrumental role in the emergence of KMVS and initial consolidation of KMVS – providing enabling linkages in formulating the project, generating/mobilizing resources, facilitating the training process of the KMVS team, and forging a networking interface with concerned organisations. Jan Vikas also served as a buffer between the government and KMVS (its dealings with GSHDC, DRDA, GWEDC) and in the initial years interfaced with the other organisations in the environment. This gave KMVS the necessary space to establish its autonomy in relation to the government and not get overwhelmed with official agenda and needs. The role of a sponsor is a tricky one – there is always a tendency to control and direct. Jan Vikas, in keeping with its own philosophy of autonomy and decentralization, did not try to control KMVS, but focused on institution building. This relationship has grown and matured over the years - mutually enhancing each other's capacity and credibility.

Jan Vikas remains an important link - a sounding board for advice, resource support, training and organisational development. Gradually the larger Jan Vikas family of organisations formed a network. The Jan Vikas Ecology Cell (JVEC) - now known as Sahjeevan, came into being to work on environmental issues in Kutch[17]. A Kutch branch of Centre for Social Justice was established by Jan Vikas to support KMVS in legal work and training[18]. As KMVS diversified its work and gained in experience this relationship also matured. In the last four years the CRST unit of Jan Vikas has forged independent relationships with the Taluka Sangathans[19] –it has picked up the core administrative cost of Taluka Sangathans – starting with a 75% contribution in the first year and gradually tapering it off over a five-year period. The larger Jan Vikas family, consisting of CRST, CSJ, Drishti and Sahjeevan on the one hand and Anandi and Swati on the other have remained a close-knit group. They support each other through training, perspective building, criticism and also provide each other a sounding board. Discussions with some of the above organisation reveal that this relationship has been valuable and has remained non-competitive. In addition to this group, a larger number of individuals in the government and in civil society associated with the Jan Vikas groups are also part of this informal support group. This informal network has remained a major source of strength.

Gujarat is well known for a vibrant NGO movement. In 1995 a group of organisations working on drinking water issues came together to take stock of the situation and support each other in their work. KMVS played a key role in the creation of "Prava" – a drinking water network. One of the objectives of this network has been to re-popularise traditional water harvesting and water management systems. KMVS along with Nafisa Barot of Uttan-Mahiti and Dr Sudarshan Iyengar of GIDR played a key role in lobbying the World Bank on water management systems. Since the 1998 cyclone and the formation of the Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan, most of the work on water is now been done at the district level. While the Prava network is a valuable forum, the ground realities in Gujarat today make district level initiatives more manageable. The Abhiyan has tried to bring together NGO, respected citizens of Kutch, industrialists and concerned people from all walks of

[17] See the environment section of Chapter 2 for details.
[18] See the legal cell section of Chapter 2 for details.
[19] See Chapter 3 on empowerment for details.

life. Water is a very important issue in Kutch and the need for a broad based alliance to harvest and manage the meagre water resources of the region has been driven home as never before. KMVS has identified this as one of the priority areas of work for the next three to five years. Given the commitment to strengthening the Abhiyan and initiating systematic work on natural resource management, Sushma Iyengar now devotes almost 50% of her time (Alka Jani 20% and Lata 10%) to the Abhiyan. Similar commitments have been made by other partner organisations – namely VRTI, Sahjeevan, Kutch Yuvak Sangh, Ashapura Foundation, NRD Foundation and Sarva Sewa Sangh etc.

In 1995 a number of women's organisations got together as the Working Group on Women In Gujarat (WGWIG). Apart from providing a forum for sharing experiences and capacity building of each other, this group decided to bring Mahila Sarpanches from across Gujarat together and mobilise them as a mutual learning and support group. This culminated in a Panchayat Mela in October 1997 – where 1000 women participated. This was the first time that all the women's organisations of Gujarat got together and pooled their training experiences. KMVS was one of the lead organisations in this network. Preparatory work for the Panchayat Mela proved to be a valuable learning ground for KMVS; it also propelled the organisation to collate information on Sarpanches who were removed through a no-confidence motion. KMVS is in the process of preparing a Public Interest Litigation on this issue, with support from CSJ and other experiences organisations[20].

Another important network is the Forum for Planned Industrialisation of Kutch (FPIK). This was also triggered off by a local crisis – in this case the establishment of Sangi Cement Plant. The local people in Abdasa were quite upset about the possible impact of this plant and it was the Sangathan women who took up the issue. KMVS realised that scientific assessment of environmental impact would be necessary. It also believed that it should not take this on alone and that it should involve other organisations and concerned citizens of Kutch. It approached Sahjeevan, Himmat Singh Ji of the erstwhile royal family of Kutch, prominent educationists, advocates Balaben Thakar and other NGOs. Sahjeevan initiated an impact assessment study in 1996 and a petition was lodged under the banner of FPIK. Subsequently this forum has addressed a range of issues: destruction of mangroves by the Adani Port, Abdasa (1998), Ballarpur bromide plant in Pachcham (1999), resisting the sale of land to a thermal power plant in Mundra (1998). Today this forum also includes some eminent Kutch industrialists from Mumbai. KMVS continues to play a lead role in defining priorities of this forum.

KMVS is also part of a few other smaller regional networks like one of NGOs working in Kutch and Saurashtra (lead taken by Anandi), women and violence network (lead taken by Swati) and one on watershed development (lead by Gandhi Peace Foundation). Apart from these networks KMVS has established one-to-one relationships with a number of organisations.

[20] For more details see the section on Panchayat in Chapter 2

Training and capacity building activities also lend themselves to mutually beneficial relationships. In the last ten years KMVS has reached out to a number of organisation for training support. Training support for their health programme continues to be provided by Sewa Rural in Jhagadia. This long-term relationship has enabled KMVS to venture into an area where its core team has little professional expertise. It has also sent workers to Chetna – an Ahmedabad based NGO working on health and nutrition education. Anandi, a sister organisation, works with KMVS on gender training. Similarly CSJ supports legal training. In 1995, KMVS reached out to Nirantar – Centre for Women and Education, a Delhi based NGO to seek support in curriculum development and programme support. Theirs was a three-year partnership. Ujjas, the Sangathan newsletter, and the radio programme were conceived and developed during this period. The Nirantar team interacted intensively with the education cell of KMVS resulting in developing of in-house expertise in curriculum development for ongoing training programmes with adult women and literacy[21]. Another area of collaboration has been study tours and field visits. Over the years rural women leaders and KMVS functionaries have visited a range of organisations to learn about watershed development, education, savings and credit and healthcare. The team recollects their visit to Tarun Bharat Sangh of Rajasthan as a very important landmark in the understanding of watershed development.

Sahjeevan, initially called Jan Vikas Ecological Cell, was set up in 1991 under the sponsorship of Jan Vikas as a response to KMVS' felt need for training and resources in the area of natural resource management. Its explicit mandate for the first five years was to provide environmental expertise to KMVS and ultimately develop the same in the environmental team as well as contribute to development of eco-cadres at the village level. Over the years Sahjeevan has worked on environmental issues along with women leaders of the Sangathan. Sahjeevan has been able to involve the people and also take the findings of the scientific assessment studies back to the people, thereby strengthening the information base of the community. It has drawn upon geologists and traditional knowledge and has been able to initiate informed debate between the people and scientists on environmental issues. Its relationship with the Sangathan is quite different from that of KMVS. During discussions, both organisations admit that they have different skills and different strengths. The environment cell of KMVS has recently merged with Sahjeevan.

Recently a few Traditional Birth Attendants (Dai) and KMVS health team members were trained in Tata Memorial, Bombay on women related cancer. This was made possible by collaboration between KMVS and a charitable trust based in Mandvi – the Bhojay Sarvodya Trust. To ensure maximum impact of such an exposure, the learning has been further disseminated to other dais in different villages. Diagnostic camps were organised by the trust and the doctors were assisted by TBAs. As a result they have been able to identify vulnerable cases. So far 575 women have been examined, 33 cases of prolapsed uterus operated upon, and 17 cases of suspected cancer under observation. Teams of doctors are provided by the trust while KMVS does the awareness generation and mobilisation work. The Bhojay Saryodaya Trust leaders are now also interacting with

[21] Please see Chapter 2 for details.

KMVS on environmental issues, drought management and a range of local development concerns.

A similar one-to-one relationship has been established with the Vivekananda Research and Training Institute (VRTI) and the family of trusts including Srujan – a pioneer handicraft promotion body in Kutch. Apart from providing training in soil and water conservation and small technologies, KMVS today has formal linkages with Srujan. When KMVS withdrew from Lakpath Taluka, the artisan women's groups were handed over to Srujan. They are also part of FPIK and Abhiyan. A similar relationship was also nurtured with Saraswatam – an educational trust working on pre-school education as well as primary and secondary education in Mundra Taluka.

KMVS has adopted a pragmatic approach to local networks and has been able to reach out to a large number of local people. It has also invested substantial human resources and time on nurturing and developing these relationships. However, KMVS has adopted a cautious approach to national and global networking. While it participates in some activities and conferences (Women's conference in Beijing), it has resisted getting sucked into it. As a result of this cautious approach, KMVS is viewed being choosy at the national level. On the other hand, Gujarat NGOs perceive KMVS as being proactive, open and participatory.

Partner NGOs report that KMVS knows what it wants from a partnership and steers the partnership in that direction. Most partners appreciate this pragmatic approach. A few partners however say that this approach leaves little room for mutual exploration and creativity and that KMVS does not always accommodate the learning needs of intermediary organisations. Analysing this observation one partner said that KMVS likes to interact on its own terms, probably because it has greater clarity on the outcome of partnerships. This has also been the observation of several resource persons who have interacted with the organisation over the last ten years.

All the above alliances and networks have been built on KMVS's core philosophy of working with people, existing state structures, and voluntary agencies rather than against them. These alliances constitute a qualitatively different forward link for KMVS as it emphasises horizontal linkages where all participating members operate at a similar level and retain their autonomy. Further, these alliances also contribute to the empowerment of KMVS as an organisation and help carve a collective space for mutual learning, support, and motivation. This is perhaps the greatest asset of KMVS as an organisation – the goodwill and support it has generated in Kutch and in Gujarat.

CHAPTER V

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) came into being in 1989 with the objective of working with poor rural women towards their total empowerment. Right from inception KMVS decided to access national resources and work in partnership with the government. The decision to establish a Sangathan that would ultimately be directed and owned by rural women (represented on the Board of the organisation) set KMVS apart from most existing grassroots organisations. The very fact that a new organisation was opting out of the foreign donor market sent ripples in the development community – especially among foreign donor assisted organisations. These three principles have influenced their strategy and defined their identity.

- **National resources only:** Over the years KMVS's principled stand to stay away from foreign funds not only defined its identity, but also influenced its work ethic and style. Looking back over the last ten years it is heartening to note that KMVS has managed quite well - even though it has been hard work. The austere work culture and strict accountability systems is a product of this struggle. Its credibility, especially in sensitive border areas, has not been eroded. In the first five years KMVS, received an open-ended grant from the Border Area Development Programme of GOI (Ministry of Human Resource development). This gave KMVS the space to consolidate its work without worrying about fund raising and targets. While regular reports were submitted to the government, the very fact that there was no one who was breathing down their neck gave the pioneering team the opportunity to 'learn by doing' and also 'learn through its own mistakes'. On the negative side, no one from the government visited the organisation and KMVS was practically left alone to do what it wanted, as long as regular reports and audited financial statements reached New Delhi. This also influenced its working style. This non-negotiable principle has also been interpreted differently – for example some NGOs and foreign donors view this as arrogance. Others view this as a deficiency, leading to a lack of professionalism, especially in reporting and documentation. There is a common misconception in India that accessing foreign funds somehow makes organisations more professional.

- **Working in partnership with government**: KMVS started off with a senior government officer as the chairperson and four other ex-officio nominees on the Board. While this structure provided a distinct identity in the early years, the organisation went through a crisis in 1992. Some vested interests tried to take over the organisation using the fact that the Chairperson of KMVS was the Commissioner for Women and Child Development of the Government of Gujarat. Interestingly, KMVS weathered this storm with the support of senior officials in Gujarat government. Six years of political instability, communal tensions and general deterioration in social and economic situation of people have left their impact on structures of governance. On the one hand Panchayat

Raj Institutions raised the hopes of women across the state. On the other, a palpable increase in levels of corruption, influx of foreign funds through central sector programmes of the government and the march of globalisation has changed the texture of governance. In the last five years state governments have publicly acknowledged inefficiency in delivery of basic services. Simultaneously, international agencies like the World Bank and the UN system have been urging governments to involve voluntary organisations in community mobilisation and service delivery. The non-performance of existing government programmes and pressure to show results encouraged administrators to seriously reach out to field based organisations to mobilise people and enhance their access to government resources. Inviting NGOs to activate village education committees, implement water harvesting systems / watershed programmes, form women's health committees etc. have created new avenues for collaboration, at least in Kutch. This cannot be said for the rest of Gujarat, especially the Dangs and other tribal areas where NGOs are viewed with suspicion. The moot point is that while the larger administrative and political environment has become polarised, district level administrators look at KMVS as a potential partner. KMVS's growth has therefore to be viewed in this context. In the last few years KMVS has modified its structure and renegotiated its formal relationship with the government.

- **Sangathan ultimately owned by rural women members**: This third non-negotiable has left a distinct mark on the organisational structure of KMVS. Rural women came together in village level collectives to federate at the Taluka level. At the Taluka level the women leaders are elected and form the Taluka Samiti, which is the primary planning and decision-making body in the organisation. They also elect their representatives to the KMVS Board. Today, four of the eleven Board members are Sangathan representatives. All other institutional structures have evolved around this basic structure. Technical and professional inputs are now organised through six Resource Support Centres. The relationship between the Sangathan and RSCs is still evolving.

KMVS is working in 4 Talukas and 150 villages. The Sangathan has 6200 members. KMVS is also working with 56 Mahila Sarpanches, including 20 from Rapar and Bhachau Talukas. The four Taluka Sangathans are almost autonomous although they have not yet been registered independently. There are six Resource Support Centres - Savings and Credit, Handicraft, Health, Education, Legal and Panchayat. The Environment unit has recently been merged with a sister organisation Sahjeevan (details of the above are in the main report). KMVS has today a team of 38 full time workers (all local women) and 37 rural women leaders (full time workers of the Sangathan) of the Taluka Samitis. In addition there are approximately 175 rural women working as paraprofessionals - dais, legal workers, environment animators, radio reporters, savings and credit group leaders (Agewan), health workers, community teachers and handicraft managers.

Empowerment is an elusive concept - it means different things to different people. In the 1980s – when it replaced “women’s development” – women’s organisations interpreted

it differently. Organisations like Self Employed Women's Association (Gujarat), Co-operative Development Federation (earlier known as Samakhya, Andhra Pradesh), Working Women's Forum (Tamil Nadu) focused on economic empowerment. Enhancing women's access to credit, increasing their collective bargaining power, linking them to markets and training women to take control of their income – these were seen as prerequisites of autonomy. On the other hand, the National Dairy Development Board focused on enhancing women's access to income (not necessarily control over that income) through milk co-operatives. Again empowerment was viewed in economic terms.

Autonomous women's groups and feminist organisations in rural and urban areas focused on enhancing the "inner" strength of women. Enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence, making private issues like domestic violence, dowry harassment / death public and creating support structures for women was taken as the starting point. The effort led to the sudden visibility of dowry, domestic violence, human rights violations and so on. The focus was on empowering individual women and creating social role models. Setting up and operating shelters for battered women, counselling cells, legal education and legal cells were among the prominent activities.

A third approach was to enable women to come together in collectives and enhance their collective bargaining power. The national Mahila Samakhya Programme and several NGO initiatives focused on building the self-esteem and self-confidence of women while simultaneously facilitating the creation of rural women's groups (Mahila Samooh / Mahila Sangh). It was argued that women need the space and the time to come together and rediscover their individual and collective strength. Gradually, as women gain in strength, confidence and information – they will articulate their needs and can be supported in their work by external inputs and support. Economic activity through self-help groups could come at a later stage. Similarly, it was believed that women would themselves raise issues of domestic violence, dowry etc. This approach gives primacy to education and training as catalytic forces.

The pioneering team of KMVS was aware of different approaches to women's empowerment. It started with an open-ended agenda, including an operational definition of empowerment and a list of doable activities. In the first year, for instance, it focused on learning about the area, building rapport with rural women and creating a core unit. Starting with handicraft women artisans, KMVS gradually worked towards building women's groups in the villages that are today federated as the Sangathan. Building local cadre of women workers, training women as specialists in health, education, environment regeneration, water harvesting, paraprofessional legal work, midwifery and preventive health - KMVS has tried to create an environment where women articulate their vision of empowerment and gradually move towards it. As women gained strength and understanding, their vision of empowerment changed. Shooting a moving goalpost was not easy. Therefore, **KMVS focused on concrete goals and moved forward in an incremental manner.** As a result the Sangathan women are a down-to-earth group. After ten years, rural women manage the four Taluka Sangathans with the Taluka Samiti handling administrative, mobilisation and logistic responsibilities. While KMVS provides

professional inputs for specific activities and programmes, rural women's mobilisation and management of their federation is in the hands of local women leaders.

Operationalising the elusive concept of empowerment was not easy. The essence of empowerment is participation. Designing structures for meaningful participation and creating opportunities for continued participation is the essence of KMVS operational strategy. KMVS adopted a management approach – village level Mahila Mandals, Taluka Sangathan and issue based committees provided a structure for participation in agenda setting, decision making / prioritisation and also implementation. Taluka Samiti members negotiate with banking and financial institutions with support from KMVS staff – thereby creating opportunities for participation in processes that are normally not available to rural women. Training and exposure to new ideas alone are not enough, creating structures for systematic learning and participation is necessary. KMVS realised that this is continuous process, and sustaining these structures and keeping them vibrant is as important as creating them.

KMVS does not view empowerment as a zero-sum game. As each group in the community gets empowered, other groups also want to participate. Evidence of the added burden of adolescent girls is now pouring in from different parts of the country – even where their mothers are part of SHG and empowerment programmes. Creating structures for the articulation of the predicament of adolescent girls and also enhancing their bargaining power within the family and in the community has emerged as a need. KMVS has now started working with adolescent girls – the ones who invariably shoulder the burden of household work when their mothers go out. Similarly, working with girls may alienate adolescent boys – who are also a disempowered group in the community. The question is when and how will KMVS reach out to adolescent boys and men in the community.

As the Sangathan grew in confidence and strength most of the routine work of planning activities and monitoring was taken over by Taluka Samitis. KMVS core team is called upon to support, train and build capabilities of rural women leaders. After an intensive review KMVS decided to create Resource Support Centres. This decision was operationalised in 1997. The Sangathan is becoming more autonomous every year though it still has a long way to go. It now links up with RSC for specific inputs. These inputs are planned in advance in consultation with all the RSC (in one Taluka level meeting). RSC started capacity building work through training, exposure to new ideas, teaching / learning aids, linkages with mainstream systems (PHC / doctors), design and marketing inputs, liaison with banking institutions at state / district level (they manage the Taluka level quite well) and so on. The KMVS core team continues to provide finance and accounting support. Sangathan women are strong, articulate and tuned into local development issues. Many of them are active in the Panchayat and many more are planning to contest elections to the PRIs in the next round. Over the years, women's own perception of empowerment and development has evolved and changed and they have in turn influenced the strategy of KMVS. Efforts are underway to make the resource units (handicraft, environment, savings and credit) autonomous. The core team is confident that KMVS will one day metamorphose into a federation of autonomous women's groups

and resource units. It is important to reiterate here that the three 'choices' KMVS made - regarding funding pattern, nurturing local women leaders and a democratic structure - determined to a large extent the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the organisation. These were difficult choices to 'implement', but strengthened the fabric of the organisation. However, greater autonomy will remain unfulfilled unless women leaders become literate. This remains a challenge.

Women, KMVS believes, are not a homogeneous entity. While they share issues and concerns, there are significant regional and community differences. Strategies for collective empowerment and individual empowerment differ - for example the existential situation of Muslim women is unique, especially in a communally charged climate. The negotiating strategy adopted by Durbar and Rajput is different from those of Dalit women. Recognising these differences and creating space for women to explore options and beat their own path has been an important aspect of KMVS overall approach. The complex interplay between different strategies is fascinating - counselling, negotiating, exerting pressure through public rallies, taking legal action and filing cases in the court of law and building peer pressure through existing community networks. What is important is that in this entire process KMVS has been able to forge a common identity as a Sangathan - women from different communities and Talukas sit together, discuss strategies and work together. Respecting diversity and resisting the temptation of generalised (or simplistic) solutions to complex issues is KMVS's strength. However the emergence of resource units that specialise in specific areas could however lead to a search for more generalised strategies and inputs. It is too early to predict how this will impact KMVS's current approach of making space for diversity.

Over the years KMVS has worked on a wide range of issues – environment regeneration, water, handicraft, health, education, legal education, dowry, cyclone relief (survey to enumerate loss of cattle, crops and assets) – some of which are visible in the media and to the government. It did not feel compelled to limit its mobilisation to “women’s issues” – but defined all survival issues as women’s issues. There are positive and negative repercussions of this strategy. KMVS has no “core area” or an issue linked identity. In the early years, its work with women artisans was perhaps the most visible. But in the last five years innovative strategies have been adopted to revitalise the health delivery system and enhance women’s access to reproductive health care. This was done both in collaboration with the government PHC in Abdasa and linking up with a local philanthropic trust to provide specialist care for women suffering from prolapsed uterus. Similarly, women were encouraged and supported to access government schemes in rural development, pension for old people, immunisation and child health etc. Its collaboration with Sahjeevan on drinking water, irrigation, sanitation and environment regeneration has also attracted some attention in the district. The core team argues that KMVS chose to build capabilities to respond to all the emerging issues. In a sense the almost 'experimental' mode of operating has created small models – which taken together gives a glimpse of what holistic empowerment could be like. All these inputs have not converged in one area – but spread across four Talukas. One could ask if it has spread its resources thin. Some of the senior staff members see this as a weakness while others feel that this

has given the Sangathan hands-on experience and models to work with. This continues to be debated in KMVS.

KMVS has tried to balance quality and quantity. Over the years it has been under pressure to expand the area of operation and move into more Talukas. Simultaneously, there is pressure from within to work more intensively in the existing villages and ensure synergy of different components. There are times when the core team feels that it should work towards at least one model village in each Taluka. This is a difficult choice and KMVS has adopted different strategies at different points of time. Within a macro frame 150 villages looks like a small unit, but from Bhuj - the time, energy and attention to detail that goes into villages that are far apart - it seems like handling the universe. This contradiction is not easy to resolve and ultimately the decision will rest on self-assessment of KMVS team. There is a growing feeling in the organisation that as and when Taluka Sangathans and Resource Centres become fully autonomous they could move into other Talukas. KMVS started working in Rapar and Bhachau in 1997. Experienced social activists admit that large-scale operations result in loss of quality and personalised interaction with the community. Even now the core team of KMVS feels that it is getting alienated from rural women, as a significant chunk of time is spent running the organisation. Some members of the core team want to work intensively in few villages and generate local role models that others can emulate. What are the positives and negatives of the quality-quantity debate in the larger developmental and political context in the country?

- KMVS is under pressure from the government, national donors and also local leaders to start working in other Talukas. It has tried to respond by including women Sarpanches from Rapar and Bhachau. The positive aspect is that expansion into contiguous areas could strengthen the Sangathan and give it a larger district-wide identity. It could also give it greater leverage vis-à-vis the government. On the other hand, the sheer size and visibility could also make it vulnerable. Kutch is a large and spread-out border district. In the last ten years a number of new organisation have come up. The area of operation of different organisations is distinct and rapport between them is good. Expansion of KMVS into newer areas has therefore to be viewed in the context of the voluntary sector in the district. KMVS believes that it should not get into competitive relationships with other NGOs. For example, when KMVS withdrew from Lakhpat in 1996, the handicraft work initiated by it was taken over by Shrujan (a NGO exclusively working with artisans). Similarly, the environment resource unit of KMVS merged with Sahjeevan and Taluka Sangathans were encouraged to link up with it for support on environmental issues.
- Given the larger political environment in the country (growing intolerance of pluralism, growth of religious fundamentalism, impact of globalisation and political polarisation) one could argue that encouraging numerous small and medium-sized organisations would be a wiser strategy. Large organisations under centralised management could be immobilised by political vendetta or administrative action – if they happen to cross the path of vested interests. On the other hand, a loose federation of community based organisations, resource

groups, handicrafts units and so on could perhaps withstand attack. From this perspective, the decision of KMVS to focus on four Talukas and also work towards federation of autonomous organisations is wise. Similarly, its effort to forge alliances with other NGOs in the district and create a mutual support and learning network (without falling into the trap of becoming a mediator or conduit for funds) is noteworthy.

- Forging mutually reinforcing partnerships with other NGO is not easy and this has unfortunately been the bane of the voluntary sector in India. KMVS has tried to swim against this tide with some degree of success. The Forum for Planned Industrialisation of Kutch (FPIK) emerged in 1997 to address issues of infrastructure development and industrialisation. After the devastating cyclone of 1998 that nearly destroyed coastal areas, 12 organisations came together to create a network called Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan. KMVS has played a leading role in the creation of this network and also define its work area. The flip side is that if KMVS is really serious about consolidating and strengthening various dimensions of their programme in 150 villages, it should ideally roll up its sleeves and get on with improving quality and reach out to unreached families in these villages.

Field-based organisations like KMVS are placed in a difficult position. At one level the larger development community is very critical of dependence on urban English speaking professionals. They argue that this model is inherently unsustainable. On the other hand, donors demand greater professionalism in carrying out baseline surveys, maintaining databases, preparing periodic reports in English and interacting in an academic mode. This unfortunately sends conflicting messages to grassroots organisations and many of them are left with little choice but to either hire outsiders who may stay for a few months / years or come under the wings of intermediary organisations which have greater access to such resources. KMVS has focused on developing local leaders who are both professional and rooted in the community.

Most donor representatives and partner organisations we contacted through a questionnaire appreciated the commitment and transparency in KMVS. Herewith reproduced is some of the feedback we received: "Commitment to introspection, in our experience, is rare"; "it is a learning organisation, there is a continuous process of experimentation, reflection and conceptualisation"; "there is a general atmosphere of mutual trust, transparency and team spirit"; "financial discipline and accountability are values cherished"; "the degree of decentralisation and commitment to actually see it happen is noteworthy". KMVS adheres to strict financial discipline. Workers and Sangathan members have access to financial information - they know the budget, they monitor expenditure and they also keep track of resources. This kind of financial discipline and transparency is commendable. Experience in this sector has shown that discipline does not always go with transparency. Often the NGO head is alone privy to overall financial information. Field staff are only aware of their respective projects / responsibilities. This unique strength of KMVS can be attributed to the quality of leadership. Right from the start, KMVS has worked towards collective leadership and systematic devolution of authority and responsibility to Sangathan members and Taluka

level workers. Decentralisation of responsibility with full authority to take decisions has led to the creation of empowered Taluka Samitis, and this in turn has helped create a transparent work environment.

During field visits and interaction with KMVS functionaries and Sangathan members we observed that decisions (including financial) are taken in a participatory manner. There were several jokes about constantly looking back and reflecting. Apart from the regular two yearly exercise of systematic reflection almost every forum is used for self-assessment. One partner commented that KMVS suffers from too much reflection. Another partner commented that detailed planning and drawing up schedules is yet another passion, leaving little room for spontaneity. We probed this question in some detail. This cycle of "reflection - planning - reflection" has been internalised by the organisation and the Sangathan. We also found that too much churning leads to mechanical response to a range of issues-being self-critical has become second nature to many senior workers and Sangathan leaders. We saw letters from Taluka Samitis asking KMVS core team and staff to some and participate in reflection exercises! It has become the trademark of KMVS and their associates!

Since its first handicraft exhibition in Delhi, KMVS has come to be known as an organisation that works with women artisans and on handicrafts. At one level handicraft provided the entry point and at another level KMVS staff takes great pain to distance themselves from it. This dilemma is rooted in the fact that handicrafts are not the main income source for women. A recent impact assessment survey revealed that only 5% families are totally dependent on handicrafts for livelihood; 50% families depend on agriculture and animal husbandry and 30% on wage labour. Handicrafts have always provided a supplementary income. Sangathan women say that their long-term survival is linked to a regeneration of the environment and availability of water and fodder. Women have a deep relationship with their craft and for many communities it defines their identity. KMVS is wary of commercialisation and would like to work towards maintaining traditional crafts. Striking the balance is not easy because the larger handicraft environment in the country is geared to export market. KMVS has created a brand name “Qasab” and is trying to market traditional crafts and encourage women to become master craftspersons. Whether it will maintain this balance, especially during the drought years when women may be tempted to work for money, remains to be seen. Administratively, the handicraft cell is linked to the Sangathan, which manages distribution of raw material, payment of wages and rotation of profits for handicraft-related work and loans for Sangathan members.

Coming after a gap of five years, one member of the review and documentation team observed that ‘Savings and Credit’ has become a major activity of the Sangathan. Rotating women's own savings, accessing loans from financial institutions and banks and lending - these activities have become very visible. This has given the Sangathan women greater confidence to negotiate within their family and community and also with the outside world. This has also given them a sense of collective identity and autonomy. In the first two years of the Savings and Credit programme, KMVS core team encouraged the Sangathan to access its own resources for administration and management. As a

result, from the start the Savings and Credit programme gave the Sangathan an independent identity - it was "its own" programme and it was fully autonomous to manage it. In the first two years (1996-98) it received a grant from CRST (Jan Vikas) for its administration, meetings, travel and honorarium for the Samiti leaders. By 1999-2000 the Sangathan had managed to access funds from Ministry of Rural Development, GOI (using KMVS as a post office) while using the interest from its Savings and Credit programme to support the administration and management cost of the Samiti. 26% of their costs were met for administration related costs from the handicraft account. In the last two years the Sangathan has been able to access NABARD loans through Dena Bank and Gramin Bank. This is used by the Sangathans for giving production and consumption loans to women members.

The savings and credit programme has not only fulfilled poor women's credit needs but has also enabled the Sangathans to become self-sufficient. Most SHG programmes across the country are based on local groups, which in turn are federated to form Taluka level or District level bodies. In the case of KMVS the Sangathan emerged first and the savings programme followed. It is more like a savings scheme (not savings group) of the Mahila Mandal. Women members save at the village level; this is brought by the group leader to the Sangathan bank on the 'bank' days. Records are maintained member-wise as well as Mahila Mandal-wise. Women members apply for loan and the group decides or recommends who should get it. The borrowers and the group leader go to the bank to collect the loan and make repayments.

- A recent evaluation (external) revealed that this model does not restrict the number of women members (as is sometimes the case in SHGs) and has promoted self-management. This was achieved after intensive training inputs. It is quite noteworthy that the savings programme has never received any grant; it however access is loans from banks. Further 26% of the administrative cost of the Sangathan is contributed by the savings scheme. It was also noted that group leaders and managing committee members have a fairly good understanding of financial complexities, including banking. As a result they now negotiate loans with the banks on their terms. The evaluation also revealed that they have leveraged their funds well, funds were not lying idle at any point.
- One of the areas of concern is that the Sangathan has become the reference point for women and not the Mahila Mandal. The Taluka Samiti is perceived as 'the higher decision-making authority ', even though rules have evolved by consensus. Second, Mahila Mandals do not operate like a SHG where finances being handled entirely by the village group. As a result, the Mahila Mandals have been absolved of the larger responsibility of revolving their savings. This is done at the Taluka level. Third, since loans have to be taken at the Taluka level, members report that they experience problems in accessing emergency small loans. As a result the lending on small loans for consumption is very low and the minimum lending is becoming Rs. 1000. This may also be a result of changing household expenditure patterns. The proportion of production loans has increased considerably. Women borrow from each other for short periods.

It was reported that in rare cases they also go back to moneylender, repaying when they received their loan from the Sangathan on the bank-day.

- The evaluators concluded that the savings and credit programme has become a sustainable source of funds to run the Sangathan and women members' ability to pay for running the Sangathan is gradually increasing.

Leadership is indeed important and as stated earlier, KMVS believes in devolving responsibilities and building collective leadership. However, systematic efforts to build capabilities and enable the second-tier to gain confidence to deal with the outside world are also important. KMVS could explore opportunities for intensive international exposure for the current lead team. While they are competent and capable, such exposure would enhance their confidence to deal with the predominantly English speaking development world. Similarly, intensive literacy programmes and state and national level exposures are necessary for Sangathan leaders. Building their confidence alone is not enough, building capability is as important. One is incomplete without the other. This brings us to the question of ongoing training, exposure and learning opportunities. This was given a lot of importance in the early years. But, according to the core team, perspective building and leadership development has been neglected in the last few years. In its place new recruits are being trained in their respective fields. This is indeed an area of concern and needs the special attention of the core team. This issue was discussed on several occasions with workers at different levels. We found that the organisation is wrestling with this and is in the process of streamlining training and capacity building.

Among the leadership issues we explored was the balance between responsibility and authority. A large number of organisations devolve responsibilities to field workers as also to "experts". What is interesting in KMVS is that the authority to take decisions accompanies this devolution. The Taluka Samiti is empowered to take decisions and so are the resource cells. The Executive Team meets every week to take stock – but by and large each unit is encouraged to take decisions and manage its affairs. As a result, they have to make a conscious effort to ensure flow of information. Resource persons or collaborating agencies are encouraged to interact with the concerned unit – the core team basically welcomes them and is available for specific inputs. The flip side is that very few KMVS workers have the opportunity to develop a holisticperspective. With the exception of the pioneering group that has been around for most of the last ten years, new incumbents, even those who have been in the organisation for five years, do not have a full picture. While this may not come in the way of the development of specialised units or cells, it could become a major barrier to leadership development. Greater confidence comes with sharpened political and social acumen and in-depth understanding of larger development issues. This kind of intellectual growth is often stifled when experience is limited to one or two areas / issues.

Reflecting on over 25 years of work, a senior development worker said that she used one mirror to keep her on the right path - whether her work has made a difference in the lives of the people in at least twenty villages in and around her organisation. She said every other measure was meaningless, because if the existence of an organisation has not

improved the quality of life of people in its immediate environment, then that organisation has no business to survive. During this documentation exercise we constantly asked ourselves if the work of KMVS has changed women's lives, whether it has given them strength to move forward and whether it has made them more confident.

- Sitting with Taluka Samiti women leaders, paraprofessional workers, Agewans, Mahila Sarpanch and Sangathan members - one could not but be touched by their perception of how their association with KMVS had changed their lives. Almost all of them said that this association has opened a new world of knowledge, information and exposure to the outside world - something illiterate rural women have almost no access to. They also said that their income had gone up marginally, their access to credit has gone up significantly and that they now had a new identity as Sangathan women. While these achievements are quite commendable, they also said that they have not been able to reach out to all the women in their area. KMVS has touched the lives of Sangathan members. However there are many more women in the villages and in surrounding hamlets who are not members of the Sangathan and these women are still where they were ten years back. This was also our impression. While the outreach is commendable, there is still ample scope for work in the area. The Sangathan has a long way to go before every poor woman in her own cluster of villages feels as empowered.
- Observing the Mundra Agewan meeting on (19 February 2000) we were struck by women's understanding of gender issues. They were planning an anti-alcohol campaign. Almost all the women talked about making strategic alliances in the community with men who may support this cause. They analysed gender relations in the village and also talked about how to influence men without necessarily getting into an open confrontation. This they felt was the only way to change gender relations was to go about it gradually and incrementally. Which issue to take up, how to take it up and how to mobilise the larger community around it - were discussed quite openly. The word of caution however is that it is not always possible to maintain a fine balance - readiness for a fight is also important. Being in the "always compromise" mode could also send the wrong message. Their strategy seems to be a readiness for ‘dialogue’ within certain parameters. Over the years KMVS has arrived at some core principles on which it does not compromise – especially those related to justice and equality. It also believes in working within certain culturally and socially acceptable values. At the same time, it also questions those practices and values that violate the spirit of the Indian Constitution and the principle of natural justice and spirit of equality. While KMVS does not encourage readiness for compromise, it actively encourages readiness for dialogue. This level of maturity is uncommon among social activists and this is perhaps the reason why KMVS is able to work with both the government and local community leaders.

KMVS started off as a woman's organisation in 1989. In the year 2000 it is debating how to reach out to men in the community, how women can play a more proactive role in larger social and development issues, about strengthening the Panchayat Raj Institutions, about drought proofing and water harvesting and above all about total village development. While the organisation has big dreams for the entire community, its feet are firmly rooted among rural women. This has been a bumpy and hard journey and KMVS has still a long way to go. But as external observers who have had the opportunity to visit KMVS at different points of time in their ten-year journey, we are always amazed by the courage and determination of the entire team – rural women leaders and the professionals.

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GLOSSARY:

ANANADI	
BADP	Border Area Development Project
CAPART	
CEE	Centre for Environment Education
CHETNA	
CSJ	Centre for Social Justice
CWCD	
DDO	District Development Officer
DHO	District Health Officer
DRDA	
DRISHTI	
FPIK	Forum for Planned Industrialisation in Kutch
GOI	Government of India
GSHDC	Gujarat State Handicraft Development Corporation
GWEDC	
ABHIYAN	Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan
MHRD	
NABARD	
SAHJEEWAN	
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association
SIDBI	
SWATI	
TBA	
VRTI	