

## KUTCH MAHILA VIKAS SANGATHAN (KMVS), GUJARAT

Like the colourful threads that make up the distinctive embroidery of Kutch, several diverse events “some by coincidence and some intentional” led to the setting up of Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) in 1989. Recalls Sushma Iyengar, vice president, “In the late 1980s, the ethnic look was the rage in urban India. Gurjari outlets were flooded with handicrafts. Ironically this frenetic outburst was an outcome of distress – the third successive year of drought and mass-scale migration. Traditionally the women of Kutch did not sell their pieces of embroidery but kept it as part of their dowry.”

The 1980s also witnessed a spurt of women’s organizations and the development sector began taking note of the importance of women’s empowerment. Sensitive government officials realized the linkage of women as craft producers in the time of drought and approached NGOs to do something about it.

Iyengar, fresh out of Cornell University in the US with a degree in development communication,

was keen on working to organize rural women. She visited the office of the NGO, Janvikas, just hours after the Gujarat State Handicraft Development Corporation’s chief had approached it to do something to alleviate the Kutch women’s plight.

But although crafts provided an entry point, Iyengar was wary of entering into “narrow lanes”. She did not want to form just a karigar sangathan. Along with Meera Goradia and Alka Jani – the pioneering team – she was keen to trace the roots of the problem. They sought to examine a host of issues – the varied geography and culture of Kutch, its fragile ecosystem, the effects of migration on women, poor health and lack of education and the role of women as producers in terms of social dynamics. “We knew that economic empowerment was not necessarily a corollary of social empowerment. Gujarat has a very high incidence of violence against women,” points out Iyengar.

KMVS thereby evolved into an organization



*Gynaecological camp in progress*



*Sushma Iyengar making a point*



*Bachat Bank run by local Kutchi women*

with a myriad activities designed for empowerment such as looking at handicrafts, credit and savings, health, education, natural resources management and capacity building of mahila sarpanches.

In the process it has gone through several restructuring exercises with the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) playing a major role in the process of decentralization – helping the mahila mandals at the village levels to grow into taluka-level sangathans (federation of mahila mandals) that are now registered as independent bodies. SDTT bears the administrative costs and funds the staff of the sangathans that have established their own specific identity and capacity to work on issues of gender transformation. Each sangathan has a member on the KMVS governing board which also has three state officials and two representatives from Janvikas.

The initial years were tough. The pioneering team had to build a rapport with the multi-ethnic communities. Each block had its own unique

needs that needed redressal. Many of the women led very insular lives, marrying into the same village they were born in. Javjibai Jadeja, one of the first members of the Mundra Sangathan, now on the KMVS governing board and Radhaben who illustrates the *Ujjas* newsletter laugh as they reminisce, “Sushmaben and Alkaben spent days in the villages trying to understand our needs. But our husbands said they must be from the CID, come to check opium smuggling and we were wary.”

The young city girls persisted, displaying sensitivity to the needs of the different communities and blocks, while forming a group and organizing a mahila mandal. In the Nakhatrana block livelihood and health were the focus and a crèche was the medium. In Mundra, the Darbari women faced violence and high demands for dowry despite being educated. Here savings and credit became the focus.

The initial three-members’ venture slowly

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expanded into a KMVS team with local women like Preeti Soni, Lata Sachde, Veena Joshi and others being inducted and learning social work as they worked in the villages. Today it is this rung that handles much of the running of KMVS even as Iyengar is busy in her role as head of Abhiyan (the network of 28 organizations in Kutch working for quake and drought relief) and the Craft Resource Centre to provide and facilitate trade, market design and technological support to craft organizations and artisan groups in Kutch. It is a process in keeping with Iyengar's belief that no single individual should lead a collective for long .

The nurturing of this second rung came along with another level of restructuring. At first there was no division of roles for these staff members who provided inputs to the four sangathans in the blocks of Abdasa, Nakhatrana, Mundra and Pachcham. Later, they learnt to articulate their own interest areas, to specialize and form resource support units, thereby getting their own spaces to grow. For example Soni who was interested in teaching formed the education cell. Later this morphed into the knowledge centre for media with special radio programs produced for AIR Bhuj and the newsletter *Ujjas*. Other knowledge centres are: Panchayat; savings and credit; legal matters; environment; health; and the handicrafts centre run by entrepreneur craftswomen of the Muttwa, Darbari, Rabari and Jat communities that has adopted Qasab as its brand name. SDTT has helped in the expansion of these resource units with an institutional grant.

After the 2001 earthquake, KMVS threw its entire resources and energies in relief and rehabilitation work. Sangathan women proved their ability by directing and organizing relief supplies, keeping proper accounts and ensuring equal distribution, thereby gaining huge respect from the community.

KMVS has thus emerged as a blend of an action-oriented grassroots movement as well as

a support NGO. Like an ever-expanding patchwork quilt, its women engage in various activities. So even as Iyengar is busy in her new role, we have young Sabena of the Mundra block training as a reporter by working on a radio program – *Bandhani ni gaal*, examining gender bias and violence. There is craftswoman Meghuben of the Saiyere Jo Sangathan in Nakhatrana who has made up a song recounting her visit to Italy organized by an Italian KMVS buyer to foster a revival of traditional crafts. And deep in the desert village of Hazra in the Rann of Kutch, Yamabai, Jeenabai and Mariumbai discover the alchemy of tapping water and framing guidelines for its usage to transform rural life.

For Iyengar, the successful implementation of such projects brings about a sense of joy but on an introspective note she adds that implementation must not make one complacent. For her, the larger issues of the struggle such as land rights for women, must be kept alive. For KMVS and for the collective women's movement the challenge is to go from an assertion of rights to shouldering responsibilities.

"We need to see how to structure the movement so that we look at each issue in which implementation is also accompanied with an articulation of struggle-related issues. For example, the sangathan women are now familiar with banking. Banks, too have become sensitive, but now how do the women partner with the banks in systems for the poor? Banks will give loans for consumers' needs, but not for say a solar panel or a fan. Or take health. Sangathans must learn to develop a sustainable system of health insurance and a specific insurance policy focusing on women's health."

Her vision is one transgressing beyond gender and reconciling caste differences and communalism. For her, the ultimate test of any organization is its willingness to take a stand that will ultimately nurture humanity in the collective.