

Spreading local culture through eco-tourism center

A cooperative of landless women in Gujarat are making a successful living through collective farming. By converting their village into an eco tourism centre, they are conserving and promoting local cultures and cuisine.

Jignasa Pandya and Neeruben Senma

Photo: SEWA



Women of Shri Vanalaxmi Mahila Utpadan Sahakari Mandal welcoming guests at the eco-tourism centre.

In the village of Ganeshpura, situated in Kadi block of Mehsana district, 41 women have an incredible story to share. These women belong to families who work for landowners and rich farmers. They neither own land nor have any other source of income. Working ten days a month, they used to earn Rs. 2000 a year. They are now earning the same amount in just a month. This is the story of a woman's group, Shri Vanlaxmi Mahila Utpadan Sahakari Mandal.

SEWA, an NGO in Gujarat started working with the agriculture wage earning women in the Mehsana district in 1986. Various meetings were held with these women, to understand their way of living. The chief problems put forward by the women were sustaining the family, educating children and having a steady source of income. As these women were landless, they couldn't even purchase and rear cattle. During the seasons of harvesting agricultural crop, they were employed for 10-15 days a month as wage labour by the rich farmers. For the rest of the month, they were forced to stay at home. This greatly affected their ability to take proper care of the children and family. They were unable to afford good education for their children.

During one of the meetings, SEWA planted the idea of leasing unused land and taking up cultivation on it by the women. The women were interested in the idea and also identified such land. SEWA approached the village panchayat and was successful in receiving 10 acres of land from the panchayat on a lease for 30 years.

Tending the land

The land received was completely barren and needed landscaping. The women took up the challenge, encountering several, including encounters with poisonous snakes. Undeterred obstacles, the members continued to work ceaselessly until the land was leveled. Trees were grown on the 10 acres of leveled land.

Soon they realized that the land had no source of water. As a result, the women had to walk nearly 1.5 kilometers everyday to the village

to get water for their plants. To resolve this problem, they decided to build a pond to collect and store "rain water". They were trained at the Indian Petroleum Company Limited (IPCL) to build plastic ponds and successfully built a 10 foot deep plastic pond on their land.

Once the land had abundant tree cover, the women members decided to grow seasonal crops. The land was divided into equal parts amongst themselves and a specific number was allotted for each plot. However, the members realized that they lacked the tools to carry out farming in their land. With assistance from Hindustan Petroleum Company Limited (HPCL), the required tools worth Rs. 165000 were procured by the co-operative. In the year 1988-89, SEWA helped the members by digging up a bore well on their land, which ensured sufficient water for the farmers to harvest two crops in an year. The basic agriculture expenses for the crop were borne by the co-operative group. Out of the total earnings, two parts are received by the group, and one part is kept by the member.

The Jagudan Centre of the Gujarat Agricultural University helped the women in providing knowledge about tree-plantation, dividing agricultural land and inter-cropping. The members have learnt new and scientific techniques through Indian Farmers Fertilizers Co-operative (IFFCO), Farmers Knowledge Center (FKC) and from the consultancy provided by SEWA.

The members realized the importance of acquiring additional skills for increasing their income. They underwent training on processing of vegetables and fruits from the SEWA Gram Haat. Here the women learnt to make mango and vegetable pickles, lemon pulp juices, lemon-ginger juice, lemon squash, lime squash, etc., which were sold at fairs. This led to an increase in their income. Since eight years they have been carrying out fully organic inter-cropping, using vermicompost and manure. The women members have realized that their organic produce had better quality and fetched better returns in the market. Lemons which were grown organically

had better quality and could be stored longer. This reflected in the quality of processed products as well, as they fetched them a good price and increased their income. This was the first step to self-sustainability and *SEWA Sahkaari Vruksh Ucher Vanlaxmi Mandal* was created. The members learnt to manage the co-operative themselves and have in the true sense become the owners and managers of the land.

Developing into an eco-tourist destination

The village with the support of SEWA was developed into an eco-tourist center. The objective of setting the eco-tourist center was multifold – to provide a green and serene atmosphere for urbanites, to help the cooperative become self sufficient; to provide full time employment to the women members and most importantly to preserve traditional culture and cuisine.

Initially this centre used to provide just the basic amenities such as food and boarding to the tourists. Later, the members underwent training in hospitality industry to hone their skills. The members were trained at Agashiya hotel, Ahmedabad. They were trained in basic etiquettes, housekeeping and also helped them improve their traditional culinary skills. The members of the co-operative have been specifically trained on how to welcome the tourists in a traditional way. Also, special care is taken to maintain cleanliness in preparation and serving of food.

In the eco-tourism centre, the importance of green cover is conveyed to the visitors. The botanical names, medicinal properties and uses of the plants and trees in the vicinity have been displayed on boards in English and Hindi. Trees have been grown on plots of lands in line with zodiac signs and Indian astrological formations such as ‘kundali’. This has been done to help the interested visitors

who would like to meditate in the shade of the trees which match with their zodiac signs. The women co-operative add colour to this centre by creating beautiful rangoli patterns in the plots.

With the support of Ms. Kahiniben, cottages were created from bamboo and grass for the visitors to have their meals and take rest. A separate playground has been developed for children.

A kiosk of Rural Distribution Network (RUDI) has been set up at the eco-tourist center, where freshly grown vegetables are sold. At this kiosk, RUDI products along with the vegetables grown by the members are sold.

The uniqueness of the concept has attracted various groups like the Rotary and Lions club, senior citizen groups, school children and several others who want to experience traditional Gujarati food and serene environment. Till date around 6042 tourists have visited the centre. The co-operative has a wider support now, with people volunteering to help, gradually helping them progress towards self sustainability.

Jignasa Pandya

Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)
SEWA Reception Centre, Opp. Lok Manya, Tilak Baugh,
Bhadra, Ahmedabad.
E-mail: jignasapandya@sewa.org

Neeruben Senma

Village Ganeshpura,
Dist. Mehsana, Gujarat.



“Organic Farming: The right choice for nature... you and me”

South Asia Farmers’ Conference 2010

The *Sustainable Agriculture and Farmers Rights (SAFaR)* Program aims at promoting sustainable agriculture to achieve the twin goals of empowering farmers in improving their quality of life and attaining environmental sustainability. The programme supported by Caritas Asia started in January 2008. One of the unique features of the programme is building capacities of farmers through exchange programmes. The Farmers’ Conference (FC) is a platform for farmers to share their experiences, learn from each other and be united to protect farmers’ rights. The whole programme is based on the concept of ‘travel and learn’.

The South Asia Farmers conference for the year 2010 was held in Bangalore during February 9-13, 2010. Two farmers and one staff from Caritas regions like Srilanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and India participated. The conference was launched on 9 February 2010 by Father Verghese Mattamana, Executive Director, Caritas India. For the next three days participants traveled to places like Mysore and Waynad in Kerala. They visited the farm of Mr. Chandrasekar in Mysore to know more about



organic farming practices. Later the participants visited Waynad, to learn about the processing and value addition of organic products. The workshop concluded in Bangalore with participants sharing their learnings and preparing plans to implement their learnings.