

Have You Abolished Liquor

Swati & Michael, Juna Mozda, May 2001

May 2001, Mozda

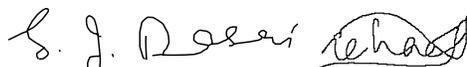
Dear Friends

Again it is almost a year and a half since we wrote last year.

In the last nine letters, we have written in detail about our activities like watershed management, women's co-operative, health activities as well as the environment related activities. So this time instead of describing our activities we have tried to write only special points and experiences.

While we are writing this, watershed development activity for this year are nearing completion.

One of our gain of a decade of work in Mozda is Ishvar. Not the Ishvar (God, in Gujarati) many of us seek, but a quiet, hard working, sincere young man of Mozda who has started working with us. More about him later. Only that most of the activities of the last eight months in Mozda have been possible because of him.

With best wishes to all, 

Watershed Programme

Last year, two new villages showed their wish to join us. One was Vedchha, 4 km from Mozda and the other was Dandawadi, a 15 km walk from Mozda through the mountains and 50 km by road. Bharu, the chairperson of the women's co-operative in Mozda hails from Dandawadi. None of these villages has a tar road serving them. The method we follow when new villages join us is that first they organise a few meetings amongst themselves to find how many families would like to participate in the programme. Then we go and participate in a meeting, help form the village development group and there are one or two more meetings to discuss various issues raised in earlier meetings and to find the volunteers. Later we organise training of volunteers and a preliminary survey of the village is carried out. Most of the work for that village is done through the volun-

teers of the village.

Most of the activities are initiated by the villagers. We provide information, explanations, possibilities, perhaps try one or two activities with a few farmers, and finally the villagers decide. We feel by taking this path, the work becomes people's own work and there is ample scope for the people to refuse, right from the start. Last year watershed programme was carried out in Mozda, Vedchha, Pansar and Dandawadi and this year in Mozda, Vedchha, Nani Singloti and Andu.

Brief summary (in figures) of watershed work for the last two years:

	Village	Number of Farmers	Land Protected (Acres)	Volume of Stone Bunds (cu. m.)	Total Length of Bunds (metres)	Total Person days of Work	Farmers' Cash Contribution	Distributed Foodgrain (kilogram)
2000	Mozda	18	22	209	472	220	567	781
	Vedchha	80	130	1,327	3,121	1,100	3,522	5,598
	Pansar	71	120	1,259	1,802	1,300	3,029	4,653
	Dandawadi	18	40	381	583	400	858	1,366
	Total	187	312	3,176	5,978	3,020	7,976	12,398
2001	Mozda	23	20	298	615	300	922	1,194
	Vedchha	95	100	1,870	2,712	2,000	5,423	7,473
	Nani Singloti	106	100	2,031	4,358	2,000	5,807	8,106
	Andu	38	60	682	1,431	700	1,837	2,722
	Total	262	280	4,881	9,116	5,000	13,989	19,495

Training

As new villages had joined, we organised a training programme for volunteers on watershed management. Two organisations from Dharampur, Sarvodaya Parivar Trust and Dharampur Vikas Samiti also sent their volunteers for the training. A total of 36 members participated. During the three day training programme we discussed rural development, sustainable use of water, forest, land, planning, self-sufficiency, role of volunteers, strength of community, relations between land, forest and water and people's rights, hydrological cycle and our role in it, methods of water storage and conservation, science of soil and water conservation, mathematics for calculating volume of bunds etc.

Along with these 'classroom' topics, a few hours each day were spent in the fields of Mozda, looking at various techniques of soil conservation, design of bunds/check dams/gully plugs, siting considerations, sizes and their correlation with each other. On the last day, the trainees also measured and calculated the volume of bunds for this year's watershed programme in Mozda. We also visited the watershed related work of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme working in Valia-Dediapada talukas. Co-ordinators from the organisation also participated to make our programme more interesting. We have always experienced that training and exposure give a new fillip to the spirit of volunteers. This was reaffirmed after this training again as we saw how widening of horizons strengthens the activities.

This year three more villages showed their wish to join watershed activities, but they could not complete the procedure described before and it seems not all villagers wanted to join, so we did not go ahead to start the programme in those villages. So bunds were made in four villages instead of seven. Now we are planning an exposure visit for volunteers and farmers to a village where tribal people managing their natural resources and are working towards self sufficiency

on their own initiative.

Women's Activities

Raising cows and selling milk to earn additional incomes was a successful experiment. While buying cows we selected only those cows which were giving milk or were pregnant (so would soon give milk). So within the first 5-6 months all the women had repaid the loans. Cows were also of good quality and the Gir breed seems to be suitable for this region, so barring a few minor illnesses, there were no major problems in rearing the cows. One cow died because of a snake bite. But the cows are insured so the co-op member received another cow, albeit after a year. The advantages we see from the cow project are,

- it increased regular income for families and women got an activity at home
- children started getting some milk
- because of the success of cow project, a spark of happiness and confidence could be seen amongst the women who had bought cows during the first year. Not only that but this affected the atmosphere of the whole village to an extent. Unhappiness with the women's activities or objections to it from men diminished. Slowly 45 women have become members of the co-op. It seems that the attitude of the village to us was also affected and co-operation in many activities increased.

Women's monthly meeting has also seen very regular attendance after last year's educational trip. Apart from savings and administrative activities, we also talk about various activities going on in other places, talk about a new experience or a talk by a guest is also a regular feature of these meetings. Two or three times a year we also have a combined meeting of women as well as men of 3-4 villages when we have a special guest. Success of these activities has made members of the co-op talk of their activities to their parents villages or to their friends and thus two new co-ops have been formed in Vedchha and Andu. The Mozda co-op members went there to talk about the formation of a co-op

and their experiences as well as activities carried out. Some people are trying to start a co-op in other villages as well.

Dal Making

We have written earlier that dal making project needs no cash input any more. We also have some regular customers and women have now become adept at making dal. This year most of the dal making went on in our absence and the members as well as Ishvar managed the whole process with responsibility and care.

Members of Vedchha women's co-op also expressed their wish to make dal this year. Women from the Mozda co-op showed them how and these women picked up very quickly. They processed 500 kg of pigeon peas.

Profit from this activity is mainly used for the educational trip, for small tools necessary for dal-making and if there is more, the women get a bonus.

We have to keep the price of dal higher than the market price by about Rs 5 per kilo to be able to pay the women a reasonable wage and to be able to carry out the above said activities. This is necessary for making this activity self-sufficient. We feel that this is not too much to pay for our urban customers who get organically produced and hand processed dal as well as an opportunity to support some of the most exploited members of the society. You can send us orders for the next year now! The women processed 3500 kilos of pigeon peas this year, but still we are short of dal, as there were so many orders. We hope the same thing happens next year as well!

Health Activity

Most of the work is now carried out by Ishvar, so now patients can be treated in our absence as well.

Camp on Traditional Medicines

Dr. Minoobhai Parabia, a professor at the Botany department of South Gujarat University is well known in Gujarat for his knowledge of herbal medicines. He can identify over 2000 plants and can use over 750 herbs for their medicinal properties. He also collects

herbs himself and makes medicines out of them and works as a herbal doctor. Mozda region is rich in biodiversity and herbal medicines. There is considerable local knowledge about them as well. Some herbs are known to every person here for their medicinal qualities. A lot of our friends were also interested in herbal medicines. So we, along with some friends, organised a three day camp to learn to use and identify herbal medicines. In our work here, we have tried to restore the rich culture and knowledge that tribals have, which sadly is diminishing in these *modern* times. In September 2000, Minoobhai, 22 friends (including 3 allopathic doctors), around 15 local people and two traditional herbal doctors from Surat district explored the forests of Mozda and surrounding villages learning to identify and use herbs. During evenings there were discussions about the similarities, differences and limitations of the two schools of medicine and the possibilities of convergence.

Women from Mozda co-op decided to join in the camp and to discuss women specific health problems with Minoobhai. The local youth were also very interested and had an independent session with Minoobhai. Minoobhai also taught various techniques of making herbal medicines.

The local youth gained a lot from the camp. They became interested in learning about more herbs. They have now begun making their own medicines and are also studying the books they have received. We have no doubt that the camp has played an important role in rejuvenating interest in the knowledge that is being lost.

Environmental Work

We are mainly trying to address the problems created by uncontrolled industrial 'development' in Gujarat and to lobby the policy makers and bureaucracy. But we also take up some other activities in the name of Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti (Environmental Protection Committee-PSS). As we have mentioned earlier, we will send you a detailed PSS re-

port separately, but we are writing about a few of the activities in brief. Usually we spend half the time for this work and the other half for activities in Mozda.

On one hand we can see some successes in our environmental work but on the other hand, for some issues, policy changes are necessary, which will come very slow.

Studies done during the people's tribunal we organised last year showed that ground water pollution had reached serious dimensions in the whole *Golden Corridor*. And for the last two years it has rained little. So we carried out more detailed investigations in Vapi and Ankleshwar in the last four months and brought it to the notice of GPCB (Gujarat Pollution Control Board). Ground water in and around both the estates is severely polluted. GPCB behaves as if it is totally powerless and shies from its responsibilities. One reason for this is that they have little political backing, but also they have absolutely no interest in their job or responsibility and are so afraid of industrialists and politicians that they are scared even to fulfil their obligations!

A High Powered Committee (HPC) appointed by the Supreme Court to investigate the hazardous waste situation in India visited Gujarat. PSS was successful in showing the committee see illegal waste dumps around the estate. The industrialists and GPCB wanted only to show the HPC how 'nicely' they were dealing with the waste and how much money was being spent to deal with the problem. When the HPC saw the reality, they not only took GPCB to task for its inactivity but also in its recently published report has criticised the board in very harsh words.

As our work on environment is gaining credibility, we are being invited to participate in more and more studies mainly done for the Government of Gujarat. One such study was done on status of environment in Gujarat, sponsored by the World Bank. Again we were able to provide factual information about the real situation which was incorporated in the report. We are beginning to par-

ticipate in another such effort to develop environmental indicators.

Other Activities

●**Trip to Germany:** Michael travelled to Germany from September to November 2000. During this trip I had the opportunity to visit friends involved in protests against nuclear energy (and weapons) and participate in protests against nuclear waste dumping. I also had opportunity to learn about windmills. I had a very good time with a couple of friends in South Germany, trying to live on least amounts of fossil fuels and more on solar energy. It was fun to cook vegetables and chapatis on solar cooker, in Germany during winter!

●**Renewable Energy:** As we have mentioned in our previous report we have begun to use solar electricity. We have completed installing the system now. Since last eight months we are not dependent on state electric supply for lighting in our house. In monsoon, even if the battery is not charged, we can have some light for a week. We expect that by replacing the battery every 4-5 years or so, the system will last quite long.

Many villages of our country (about 80,000 by government figures) still use either kerosene or wood for lighting. Efficient and brighter lighting system is one of the foremost needs in such areas. Together with two more friends, we developed a pedal power generator which is very simple to operate and maintain. One has to pedal for ten minutes for forty minutes of light. At the moment residential schools in areas not served by the grid are using them. This generator worth Rs 9,000 is being bought by fitness centres as well!

●**Youth Activities:** We have been actively participating in planning and organising youth camps under the aegis of Gujarat Sarvodaya Mandal. The effort is to help the new generation in conscientising about the challenges ahead.

A camp in Diwali vacation (November) was organised to discuss and understand the current situation of Gujarat.

This summer we organised a camp in Kutchh, where the devastating earthquake had occurred. This was a reconstruction work-camp. The daily routine consisted of 4-5 hours of hard labour and afternoon sessions were organised to understand natural disasters.

We also organised a camp in Vedchi for activists of Umargam, focusing on movement building. It included technical aspects of port and related issues, laws and our rights, songs-slogans... This camp proved to be very effective in confidence building.

●**Mendha-Lekha:** This small tribal village of Maharashtra state is on the path to self-rule for the past seven years. They have successfully abolished liquor, hold regular general assembly meetings and have an ongoing study circle of village youth in which they discuss various issues related to their lives. They have no NGO in the village but the village council has been registered. All developmental funds come to the village council which executes the development projects.

Devaji is the leader, but speaks little. Ever since Devaji visited us with a few activists of Maharashtra about three years ago, we wanted to visit his village. The village forest has been protected with deep understanding and planning. Every bit of village land has been utilised with care. Behind all this is Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, who helps or guides the people of Mendha whenever they need any help. Visit to Mendha was a highlight of last year. I asked at the general assembly, I live in a village like this, what advise do you have for us? Where should we start? An old man in torn clothes said, have you abolished liquor? I said no. So he said, then nothing can be done. First remove liquor from the village, only then other activities have any significance. I talked about this in villages where we work, and people did nod their heads in assent.

●We have written about Bharji's well in an earlier letter. This well is used by fourteen families. They grow about thirty different crops like mung beans, wheat, sesame seeds, ground nuts, millet,

maize, pigeon peas, paddy, variety of green vegetables, spices etc. They are almost self sufficient in food. This summer children from these families went around selling fresh vegetables. So the village now gets fresh vegetables even in summer because of this well, which indeed is a luxury in this area.

●We have written before that after a sanctuary is declared here, there is a fear that people's rights will be curtailed. The behaviour of the government departments here is alienating the people. This in turn is changing the attitude of people towards the forests.

●Police entered our home last September in our absence. Without any provocation from our side, the Dy.S.P. and P.S.I. went through a lot of our belongings, and took some papers from our home without our permission. When we learnt about it, we immediately lodged a strong protest at the police station. At last the senior officer realised his mistake and apologised and returned all the papers.

The Story of Ishvar

When we came here, he was about ten. During our activities with children we did notice Ishvar's quiet, intelligent and sincere personality. But we did not have close contact for years. When he was studying in tenth year at school, he lost vision in one eye suddenly. Investigations revealed he had tuberculosis in the right eye. Careful medical care from doctors of SEWA-Rural prevented the disease from spreading but the damage could not be reversed. He did appear and pass the tenth year exams, and scraped through the 11th. But reading for longer periods was becoming difficult. He tried twice but could not continue his studies. He was extremely frustrated and began going into a depression. When we learnt about his state, we had a chat with him and invited him to our home and offered him various things to do which might interest him. He began with office work and a bit in the kitchen garden. Later on he took up accounts. Then came the dal project, which he handled very well. He

also started working in the watershed programme, took responsibilities in the women's meeting, surveys, farm work, bank related jobs etc. Whatever came his way, he would do it meticulously and with utmost care. He has worked with us off and on for two years now.

Since this January we offered him a monthly salary. He goes on working without bothering about the time or our presence. He also finds work himself when we are not present. He is liked by everyone and everyone is touched by his good nature and sincerity. One of our watershed volunteers came up one day to say "you are very lucky to have Ishvar". He is becoming more and more responsible and confident as his exposure increases and is becoming involved in more activities of PSS and youth camps.

We can also say similar words about other volunteers involved in the watershed project. Volunteers were selected by the villagers. They receive regular trainings and participate in the youth camps. Their understanding and eager-

ness to take on responsibilities are also heartening.

When we started work here, this was our dream, local youth should be trained and made responsible for the village work. Our role should go on minimising. We should only be involved when they want us. The ground work for this has begun and it remains to be seen how we can develop this group.

You must have realised that we have not written about any new activity this year. We might have reached a stage where the work can expand on its own. At such a time, maintaining quality in the activities we do becomes more important. We can proceed in the right direction if the expansion takes place while maintaining a live contact with people and learning continuously from them. We have to learn not only to deliver goods and services but to give equal importance to education and learning while going further.

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