

Sustainable Livelihoods: Feminist Practices

ANANDI



Navliben, Chandaben and Kamtiben live in Panchiyasaal village, about 30 km from the block headquarters of Devgarh Baria of Dahod district, one of the most backward districts of Gujarat with a predominantly Adivasi¹ population. Their homes lie amid a forest on hilly terrain. They own between 1 and 1.5 bighas² of land and are hence categorized as marginal landholders. Before 2007, they were able to cultivate only the kharif crop, dependent entirely on rainfall. The yields sufficed for only 4–5 months of the year and hence, they had to migrate to Saurashtra, a region of Gujarat about 400 km away, to undertake wage work on farms there. Says Kamtiben, “All of us took turns to migrate at different times of the year and came together as a family for only two days during Holi.” Navliben’s situation was perhaps even worse because she had taken loans from the local moneylender at a monthly interest rate of 1.5% to buy chemical fertilizers. Chandaben who was from a similar background, helped change their fortunes after she became an active member of the mahila mandal initiated by ANANDI.

Under the Sarvangi Vikas Karyakram (SVK), a holistic development programme, launched by ANANDI, Chandaben received training in vermicompost production. She then inspired Navliben, Kamtiben and three other women to start a vermicompost unit with her. Within a year-and-a-half, they were able to earn Rs. 79,730 by selling the surplus vermicompost. Says Navliben, “My daughter-in-law Manju and I used

our share of the money (Rs 30,310) to purchase a buffalo and reclaim a silver necklace we had mortgaged to the moneylender.” Besides, by using the vermicompost in their own fields and by reaping the benefits of the group lift irrigation scheme of SVK, they were able to raise two crops a year. “Now my 1.5-bigha land yields enough food to last us the whole year. We no longer migrate in search of work. What is more, I have been able to retrieve the 1 bigha of land that I had mortgaged for the treatment of my son eight years ago,” says Kamtiben.

Chandaben, the first woman from the village to take up vermicompost production, says, “I now train other women in compost production, earthworm rearing, preparing vermi-wash, and so on. This is unbelievable! Despite migrating every year, my husband and I never managed to earn more than Rs. 10,000 a year, and now, I have earned Rs. 24,570 in just one-and-a-half years. I have repaid the Rs. 15,000 I had borrowed from the self-help group for the treatment of my son. I have also got back the land I had mortgaged to the moneylender for Rs. 4000.”

The setting up of vermicompost units is not a novel idea. What is significant in this case is that such units have been used to liberate women who face multiple vulnerabilities from a cycle of migration and indebtedness, and help them assert their identity as women farmers and ensure food security for their families.

1 The term ‘Adivasi’ is used to refer to indigenous communities in India; also referred to in official documents as Scheduled Tribes (STs).

2 1 bigha=0.33 acre

About ANANDI

ANANDI (Area Networking and Development Initiatives) is a voluntary organization that has been active since 1995 in villages eastern tribal belt of Saurashtra region of Gujarat that have a large Adivasi population. Its objective is to organize and empower marginalized rural women on the one hand, and change the systemic forces which are responsible for the marginalization of women, on the other. In keeping with its community-based approach, ANANDI uses a participatory methodology. It focuses on raising consciousness and building a consensus and encourages collective problem solving and strategy development. It seeks to build women's capacity not only in terms of acquiring technical skills, but also in the spheres of social and political analysis, critical thinking and strategy development. In short, in its quest to transform women into agents of social and economic change, ANANDI focuses as much on the process as on the outcome.

Since its inception, ANANDI has laid emphasis on organizing the most marginalized members of society. Thus the people's organizations promoted by it have women from marginalized groups as their leaders. The village-level organizations, called mahila mandals, form the operational base of all of ANANDI's efforts. It is at these forums that women discuss and prioritize their problems and undertake collective

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action, such as putting up claims to government officials at the village level, block level, district level and even state levels. Participation in the activities of these village-level collectives makes women gain confidence and familiarizes them with the processes of rational decision-making and consensus-building and equips them with the skills needed for civic engagement and leadership.

The next level in ANANDI's organization of women's collectives is the sangathan. These federations of the village-level collectives deal with problems that are beyond the realm of the village, or which are shared by women of other regions. The federations give the women better visibility at the block and district levels. The sangathans differ in nature and purpose—some are loosely federated to take up common issues, while others deal with more specific income-generation needs. Table on the following page lists the seven federations instituted by ANANDI. Together, they have a membership of over 7000 women.

The seven federations of village-level collectives

Name of Sangathan	Location	Primary Membership	Focus
Devgadh Mahila Sangathan (DMS)	Devgadh Baria, Dhanpur, Dahod district Ghogamba, Panchmahal district	Adivasi and other backward communities (OBC)	Social and development issues
Ratanmahal Adivasi Mahila Sajeev Khet Utpadak ane Vechan Mandali	Devgadh Baria, Dahod district	Producers of agricultural inputs and agricultural produce	Livelihood issues
Panam Mahila Sangathan (PMS)	Shehera, Panchmahal district	Displaced Dalit, Adivasi and OBC women	Social and development issues
Panam Mahila Bachat ane Dhiran Sahakar Mandali	Shehera, Panchmahal district	Displaced Dalit, Adivasi and OBC women	Microfinance and livelihood issues
Maliya Mahila Shakti Sangathan (MMSS)	Maliya, Morbi (recently separated from Rajkot) district	OBC, Muslim, Dalit women affected by the Kutch quake	Social, development and microfinance issues
Azad Mahila Machhimar Sahakari Mandali	Maliya, Morbi district	Fisherwomen	Livelihood issues
Mahila Swaraj Manch (MSM)	Shihor, Umralla and Bhavnagar, Bhavnagar district	Elected representatives of the local self-governance bodies	Women's representation in socio-political life

In this case study, we will discuss the roles of two such sangathans – the Devgadh Mahila Sangathan and the Ratanmahal Adivasi Mahila Sajeev Khet Utpadak ane Vechan Mandali.

Project Area – Vulnerabilities and Opportunities

Adivasis in the districts of Panchmahal and Dahod have traditionally sustained themselves on rain-fed agriculture and by collecting and selling non-timber forest produce. The living conditions of Adivasis and other marginalized groups, mainly Dalits and Muslim communities, living in rural areas have remained largely unchanged in contrast with the upward trend in the economic status of the general population of the state. In fact, the degradation of natural resources, including soil, and shrinking land holdings has led to a further deterioration in their condition. The family-owned farms (less than 1-2 ha) are small and the farmers are not cognizant of alternative cultivation methods and irrigation systems that could be used to increase production. The low social status of the Adivasis and their consequent exclusion from community organizations have contributed to unsustainable survival strategies and increased their vulnerability. Thus, between February and September, more than 50% of the small rural families face food scarcity and in August and September, in

particular, 92% of the small farmers do not eat two square meals a day (study conducted by ANANDI). This has compelled a major chunk of the Adivasi population to migrate to different parts of the state, to work as construction or agricultural labourers and informal wage workers. Migration is either seasonal or annual with the migrants working at a destination for about 4-10 months and returning for two months or less for social functions such as weddings or festivals or to sustain farming. The low level of literacy and lack of occupational skills forces the Adivasis to take up tedious jobs characterized by dreadful working conditions, no social protection and economic exploitation. For women these problems are compounded by sexual exploitation.

Despite the gruelling work, these families are hard put to meet their minimum requirements and have to resort to borrowing money from local moneylenders at exorbitant rates, especially for expenditures on weddings, the construction or repair of a house and for conflict resolution by a panch under the local justice system. Illness is another drain on the meagre resources of these families and a major cause for indebtedness. The disease burden is high due to poverty and unhygienic living conditions and the Primary Health Centres (PHCs) are ill-equipped. Consequently, illnesses are not treated promptly or adequately, leading to greater losses in terms of earning capacity.

Poverty and vulnerability go hand-in-hand. Vulnerable groups experience tension in maintaining their existing status, which is potentially liable to deteriorate further in the face of risks and crises situations. If the Adivasi communities of the districts in question are vulnerable then the women of these communities are even more so. Traditionally, they have no right over the family land even though it is they who sustain farming in the absence of the men who migrate to other parts of the state. The literacy level of women in Dahod is 49% and in Panchmahal is 60% as against the state average of 71% (2011 census). As per the NFHS – III (2006-07), the overall Gujarat scenario is quite dismal as regards the health status of women, with 41.9% of rural women showing a below normal BMI and 61.7% of pregnant women suffering from anemia. Though there are no concrete figures for the districts of Panchamhaals and Dahod, our field experience has shown that the women of these districts fare much worse. In the absence of qualified pregnancy and birth support, one out of eight women dies during delivery or due to post-natal complications.

The status of single women, whether unmarried, widowed, or deserted, and of the elderly who are past the

reproductive age is even worse. For them, securing two meals a day and shelter is a luxury. Wage labour in agriculture is their only means of survival and gender discrimination makes it hard for them to find such employment.

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It is in this context that ANANDI has been working since 1995 to improve the development outcomes by focusing on the most marginalised and vulnerable.

The organization believes that these communities are unable to reap the benefits of development due to failures at multiple levels – the failure of the communities to realize their potential, the failure of the state to provide basic education, health and security, and the failure of the markets to integrate the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ as suppliers.

The first phase of ten years was dedicated to building mahila mandals and sangathans and undertaking need-based interventions on watershed development, water conservation and harvesting, health and livelihood generation. In the next phase, feminist and empowerment approaches were combined in the existing intervention strategies to create sustainable livelihood options for the most vulnerable communities under the Sarvangi Vikas Karykram, a holistic development programme,

with a special focus on child rights and single/elderly women.

Devgadh Mahila Sangathan

The Devgadh Mahila Sangathan (DMS) was formed as a collective of Adivasi women. All the mahila mandals of the 45 villages of Panchmahal and Dahod are members of the federation, which monitors food entitlements under the public distribution system, and health and nutrition services as mandated by the National Rural Health Mission, besides taking up cases of denial of forest rights and atrocities against Adivasis by the forest department. The Lok Adhikar Kendra (Gender Justice Centre), which has the mission of generating legal awareness, offers counseling support every week. This has strengthened women's action and advocacy on their right to livelihood. Over time, DMS has grown to be a significant community-based forum in the district, acting as a bridge between the community, the administration and other stakeholders for the development of the community and the region.

Sarvangi Vikas Karyakram

Seeing the potential among these women to give shape to development interventions, ANANDI decided to pilot a comprehensive project called the Sarvangi Vikas Karyakram

(SVK) to overcome the failure of the development programmes to include the poorest and the most vulnerable. The project was implemented in the 10 villages of. Khandaniya, Moti Mangoi, Sagtala, Sadra, Fangiya, Jamran, Ruparel, Kundaliya, Sevaniya and Panchiyasal to enhance the livelihood options of 800 of the poorest households, including single women.

To implement the project, Village Sarvangi Vikas Sangathans (SVS group) and village committees were formed. Each committee had about 11 members, including men. These committees were the core decision-making bodies for the selection of respondents, sites and interventions as well as for review.

One of the first livelihood enhancement schemes launched was the setting up of vermicompost units. The village-level committees helped identify single women and elderly women who were encouraged to take up vermicomposting. The prerequisites for setting up the units were:

- Availability of water
- Availability of family land (around 1 guntha³)
- Fencing to protect the earthworms from birds and animals
- Roof to protect the earth worms from direct sunlight

³ 1 Guntha = 101.2 sq mts

The first vermicompost unit, called the Sarvottam Vermicompost Producers' Unit, was launched with 11 single women from Sadra village in the year 2008. This was followed by another unit in Fangia village. The members of the two units were taken for an exposure tour to Bodeli block of Vadodara district, where the NGO Sarjan had been engaged in the production of vermicompost for quite some time. Following the tour, personnel from Sarjan came to ANANDI's project villages to teach the women, how to prepare bio-dung, make the compost beds, prepare compost and maintain moisture in the bed and take care of earthworms. Later, 60

women were trained in preparing bio-dung pits and maintaining daily production activity sheets. The women who were trained not only took up vermicompost production successfully, but also reached out to over 5000 people during the Holi melas in Kanjeta, Jhapatia, Gajapura and Panchpathra, by putting up information-cum-sale counters.

One cycle of production takes 45 days. The number of cycles completed in a year varies in accordance with the capacity of the members, and access to raw materials. By June 2009, there were 15 units in nine project villages, as mentioned in the Table below.

Production figures of vermicompost units

No.	Village	No. of units	Producers	Bags produced during April to June 2009	Bags produced till March 2009	Total bags
1	Khandaniya	4	15	194	0	194
2	MotiMangoi	1	3	0	143	143
3	Sagtala	2	8	138	537	675
4	Fangiya	1	9	0	233	233
5	Jamran	2	9	0	0	0
6	Ruparel	0	0	0	0	0
7	Kundaliya	1	5	28	102	130
8	Panchiyasaal	2	10	0	0	0
9	Sevaniya	1	2	10	128	138
10	Sadra	1	10	84	386	470
Total	10	15	71	454	1529	1983

Thus, 76,450 kg (1529 bags) of vermicompost was produced till March 2009, which increased to 99,150 kg (1983 bags) by June, 2009. Together, the 15 operational units had 71 producers all of whom were single women. By 2010, 21 new producers were selected from the vulnerable groups of widows and other single women and poor households and there were 49 operational units in 10 project villages. All the units are on private land taken on lease by the women collectively. These units are a testimony to women's capacity to become assertive with regard to ownership and marketing, which are traditionally considered male domains.

Initially, the vermicompost unit members used their produce in their own land and sold the surplus to farmers practicing swavlambi kheti (mixed cropping to fulfil their nutritional requirements). However, periodic training sessions helped them acquire better management skills and increase the rate of production. Soon they were able to earn enough to buy additional productive resources such as poultry and cattle, and retrieve mortgaged land or ornaments. What is more, they were able to ensure food security and live with greater dignity.

Women's Cooperatives

The collective enterprise of the women running the vermicompost units inspired the Devgadh Mahila Sangathan leaders to think in terms of launching a livelihood-based cooperative that could provide sustainable livelihood opportunities. The women needed support in technical matters and in establishing linkages with markets, which was provided by ANANDI. The aim of organizing women along the lines of cooperatives was to help them negotiate with contractors and middlemen for better prices, better terms for credit, and better wages. These cooperative units were also launched to raise awareness about government programmes and schemes aimed at livelihood support, so that the women could take advantage of them collectively. The first task, however, was to equip them to handle a formal structure—a difficult task, given the low level of literacy. The first such cooperative to be registered was the *Ratanmahal Adivasi Mahila Sajiv Khet Utpadak Vechan Mandali*.

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Ratanmahal Adivasi Mahila Sajiv Khet Utpadak Vechan Mandali

The Ratanmahal Organic Farm Production and Marketing Mandal was set up with four women farmers from four vermicompost units to look after the central function of marketing and procuring orders. The marketing unit widened the marketing options of the production units by selling the manure to farmers in Dahod district who had been trained by the Foundation for Ecological Security and the Forest Department. It secured orders for 1000 bags (of 50 kg each) and helped 54 of the 71 producers to earn Rs. 400 per month. It also sold 72 tonnes (1456 bags of 50 kgs each) of manure produced by 124 women to the Agro Service Centre. This helped them in earning Rs.1,10,955. As the Mandal gained confidence, it explored marketing options in neighbouring villages, haats and in distant markets Vadodara and Ahmedabad. It marketed vermicompost, vermi-wash, organic pesticide, neem oil, certified maize seeds (produced under a programme sponsored by the Monsanto Company), vegetables and cooked food. In 2013, it participated in the traditional food festival held at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad for the fourth consecutive year. Thus, with support from ANANDI, these women have challenged the notion that

only men can venture into markets, especially outside the confines of the traditional local markets

The name of the mandali was changed to suit the expansion of its functions to the marketing of products other than vermicompost. Under the SVK programme, the mandali has also acquired assets, such as agricultural tools and equipment. It now owns a tractor, a transport auto, a weeding machine and a neem-oil extraction machine, which has been installed on private land taken on a seven-year lease. The mandali now has 500 members, with an executive body of 17 members which meets every month to discuss issues and progress, and a corpus of Rs. 1,500,000. The members are working towards the registration of the body and formalizing its structure.

Linking the Lessons to Women's Right to Livelihood

Helping economically vulnerable rural women build sustainable livelihoods requires an understanding of the complex, forces which pose limitations on the choices of livelihood. Unfortunately, some of these limitations are imposed by women themselves. Any strategy adopted for the generation of livelihoods for rural women must, therefore, take into consideration multiple factors that are intrinsically

linked, such as poverty, social status, sustainability, empowerment and human rights.

As per the National Policy for Farmers (MoA, GoI, 2007), the term 'farmer' refers to persons actively engaged in the economic and/or livelihood activity of growing crops and producing other primary agricultural commodities. Farmers also include all agricultural operational holders, cultivators, agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, tenants, poultry- and livestock-rearers, fishers, beekeepers, gardeners, pastoralists, non-corporate planters and planting labourers, as well as persons engaged in various farming-related occupations, such as sericulture, vermiculture and agro-forestry. They also include Adivasi families / persons engaged in shifting cultivation and in the collection, use and sale of minor non-timber forest produce.

This brings us to the question of the status of women engaged in such activities. Are they entitled to the rights of farmers under the National Policy? This question takes on a great significance if we consider the number of people in this category and the contribution they make to the economy. A report of the National Task Force on Technological Empowerment of Women in Agriculture (2004) states that the majority of women workers in rural India are engaged in agriculture, largely as subsistence farmers, farm workers and labourers.

Almost all primary processing, storage and cooking of food at the household level is done by women in rural households. Millions of households manage to avert starvation because women take up livelihood activities such as backyard poultry farming, goat rearing, growing vegetables on homestead lands, and collecting tubers from commons.

It is women who engage in subsistence farming on rain-fed marginal lands to produce one-half of the food grains and three-quarters of the pulses produced in India. Allowing for regional variations, women are extensively involved in the production of major grains and millets; land preparation; seed selection and seedling production; sowing; applying manure, fertilizer and pesticide; weeding; transplanting; threshing; winnowing; and harvesting. Invariably, rural farms combine agriculture with livestock production, fish processing, and the collection of non-timber forest produce for livelihood sustenance. Women have multiple roles in these activities, ranging from animal care, grazing, fodder collection and cleaning of animal sheds to processing of milk and livestock products (Dand, 2010).

The term 'livelihood' has been used as an alternative to 'work' or 'employment', with the recognition that the poor engage in multiple survival strategies, several of which cannot be captured by either of the

terms. However, its meaning appears elusive despite the popularity of the term, perhaps due to the complex inter-linkages it draws on. One of the more popular definitions is the one given by Chambers and Conway (1992) – “A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living”. They define sustainable livelihoods as “A livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels in the long and short term” (Chambers and Conway 1992). Livelihood frameworks were introduced as counterpoints to the poverty approach. They attempt to locate poverty, the poor and their strategies in a complex environmental web through which survival is attempted.

ANANDI adopts a feminist approach to work out sustainable livelihood strategies for the most vulnerable groups of rural women. Not wishing to lose our way in debates on gender equality and sustainable livelihoods, we let both these considerations guide policy as well as action at the grassroots level. The pilot project offered women from vulnerable groups the option of collective action to generate income, while taking into account their limitations with regard to time and skills. From being completely marginalized, they were transformed

into individuals proud to identify themselves as women farmers and willing to act to wrest their rights in a hostile environment. The experience of working with these women has given us first-hand knowledge of what it takes to empower members of the most vulnerable groups. And now we are in a position to contribute to the debate on making the definition of farmer more inclusive to incorporate women who are engaged in allied activities, such as the collection of forest produce.

In 2010, we attempted to share the lessons from ANANDI's experiences at a three-day event held in Ahmedabad where 674 women farmers, including wage labourers, forest workers, fisher folk, livestock keepers and organic producers, as well as entrepreneurs and health workers from 73 organizations and collectives of 11 states of India came together and passed a declaration called WOMEN'S ACTIONS FOR REALISING THE RIGHT TO LIVELIHOOD.