

EFFORTS BY GRAM PANCHAYATS In enabling social change

Kachchh district, Gujarat



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Preface

According to the 2011 census, there are close to 15 million girls who are married before their legal age every year. The MHRD states that the drop-out percentage for adolescent girls at secondary school level is a staggering 17.8%, with 46% coming from SC and ST backgrounds.

Communities that undervalue the contribution and participation of girls and women limit their own possibilities for growth, stability and transformation. Prominent issues such as early and child marriage are usually handled within communities; how much of such issues fall under the ambit of local governance is a question. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993 and the State Panchayat Acts have provisioned the formation of Social Justice Committees at the village, block, and district levels to ensure that the social justice objective is pursued at every level of decentralized governance. These 3-5 member committees are mandated to plan and implement measures against child marriage; to work on adolescent girls and other social agenda.

Empowering Social Justice Committees and Panchayats thus becomes of prime importance. SETUs' efforts have been to help them re-educate themselves & broaden their understanding of Social Justice. While dialogue with citizens and community leaders continued along with SJC and Gram Panchayat members, innovative strategies adapted by the Gram Panchayats created a ripple effect in the region. The SETU Learning Lab brings out this documentation to share efforts and approaches by Gram panchayats towards integration of issues pertaining to social justice with the hope that more inclusive planning processes happen and such issues get better governed by the Panchayats.

Addressing early child marriage

A step by Kodki Gram Panchayat, Bhuj Block

"When we heard the news of the girl's wedding, we knew we had to immediately intervene as there were only 3 days left before lives could change completely. We had to talk to the families in a way that they not only stop the wedding but also understand why.....This incident taught us the importance of the larger awareness we had to raise at the community grassroots"

-Shivjibhai Gopalbhai Dabasiya, Upsarpanch, Kodki Gram Panchayat.

The practice of early child marriage among young girls aged 12-16 is prevalent in the Koli community. They quit school to engage in household work and are discouraged to pursue non domestic opportunities. Apart from this being part of their tradition, the main reasons cited for the continuation of this practice was of growing insecurity. The parents usually work all day while their children remain unattended for a long duration during non-school hours. The constant fear of a lack of security, particularly due to the rising cases of harassment compels them to believe that marriage is the safest

option to pursue. The responsibility of the daughter is now under another family, and her new husband.

Another tradition followed is the 'Saa-ta Padhathi', when 2 families exchange a boy and a girl for marriage. They will agree for an engagement of one family member only if the other family can assure another engagement with the same family. This creates pressure to get their child married earlier and keep up their word and the fear of not having enough options to marry at an older age.



Pledge being taken against early child marriage by Koli Community along with Panchayat members after the awareness program.

A case in Kodki came up in 2019, of a 12 year-old girl whose parents had a marital dispute. The father lived with an insecurity especially because he was a single parent unable to give her enough attention. The Class 5 teachers of the government school noticed her absence in



class one day and on investigation by the school management committee, the news of her upcoming wedding was revealed. The Gram Panchayat was immediately informed and action had to be taken.

“Usually, the Panchayat does not involve itself in such incidences; it is the family members and community leaders who take decisions of marriages within the community. But now that the Gram Panchayats have realized the importance of eradicating child marriage, we knew that there is a need to strategically intervene and dialogue with the community leaders”, says Shivjibhai.

The Panchayat members put in efforts to talk to parents from both the sides and to urge their families and community leaders to reconsider this. They were then invited to the Setu Office in Kodki, which was a neutral space for discussion. A representative from the health department, education department, police, Child Protection committee and the school principal were present to make them aware of the legal and health implications of this

A discussion on the implications of Early Child marriage with Koli community.

move. They were all asked to sign a document accepting that they have been made aware of the legal punishments that will follow, should they choose to continue with the marriage.

While this was seen as an immediate response to stop the wedding, the Panchayat decided to run an awareness program with the Koli community. Various district officials from the health and education departments, Juvenile Justice Board, Child Protection Committee and NGOs (Setu and CRY) engaged with the citizens to discuss the issue. The event ended with everybody pledging that they would not support early child marriage within their families and communities.

Mahila Sabha - Engaging womens' voice in local governance

Kukma Group Panchayat, Bhuj Block

"I'm aiming to make the GramSabhas safe, inclusive spaces for everybody's opinion. When the Mahila Sabhas are conducted, people don't hesitate to bring out issues unlike before when they did not even have a voice. Because of the patriarchal society, issues related to women certainly need more attention and more so, adolescent girls because they will grow up to be responsible citizens."

Kankuben Vankar, Sarpanch, Kukma Group Panchayat.



Women in Kukma were often confined to household activities because of societal and peer pressure. Girls' education beyond a certain age was considered trivial by both men and women of the village. As a reaction to this inequality of opportunities, the Panchayat thus prioritized empowering adolescent girls

through education. Non-academic education regarding hygiene and health- raising awareness about HIV, anemia, menstruation and enabling access to government schemes for girl child education and health etc have been undertaken. Short courses in tailoring and computer basics are also

"My mother wants my name also to be on the chowk for everyone to see. This move has encouraged my family to realize that we have to take girl's education seriously and push us to do well. A healthy competitive environment is created in our classrooms to do better too"

-Dhwani, Class 8 student of government school, Kukma Group Panchayat



encouraged.

Apart from initiatives to try and increase school attendance, an interesting low-cost initiative taken up in Kukma has been the naming of roads, chowks and flag posts after girls who have excelled in higher education.

The Gram Panchayat also celebrated the International Women's day by hosting various small events, games and competitions; one of which was an essay writing competition. It aimed to provoke young girls to empathize with the women around them and describe their role models. The essays were read out and all the role models were felicitated.

The inclusive nature of handling these issues has clearly made the difference.

Discussion of womens' issues at Mahila Sabha.

"During the Mahila sabhas, we were asked why we don't send our daughters to school regularly. Being in Awadhnagar, a cut-off portion from the rest of the village, we don't get transportation access easily and cannot walk 12 kms everyday. The Panchayat agreed to hire a Chakda to drop and pick-up all the girls to school everyday. This made a huge difference because we no longer had to worry about our daughters' safety and the weather for going to school on a daily basis."

-Rajiben Vankar. Parent, Resident of Awadhnagar, Kukma Group Panchayat

"Women's representation may not be completely honest in a Gram Sabha because of existing norms of male dominance. These Mahila Sabhas which are held before the Gram Sabhas become safe inclusive spaces where they relate to each other's problems and become a platform for awareness. The issues taken up get integrated in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan"

Dakshaben Sanjaybhai Vaghela, Member, Kukma Group Panchayat.

Inclusive planning process

Kunariya Group Panchayat, Bhuj Block

“The Panchayat can engage in two types of work- infrastructure and service related. While the former can be solved by handing out the required contracts, the latter can be possible only with the help of public participation. People know the problems better and help us come up with practical solutions. We felt like the voice of the youth was unheard earlier and provided provisions to include their participation within our public discussions “

Sureshbhai Chhanga, Sarpanch- Kunariya Group Panchayat.



Discussion of ward level issues between Panchayat members and citizens

When Mr. Suresh Chhanga was elected in 2017 as the Sarpanch of Kunariya Group Panchayat, Bhuj block, there were many challenges before him. Problems such as lack of public participation at every level and decision-making by limited people in the Panchayat were the first things to seriously tackle. A lack of co-ordination among local government officials, problems with malnutrition, irregular local services by panchayat, unemployment and high drop-out rate of girls from schools were some of the other glaring issues. Coming

from a background of studying Social Work and Law academically, he chose to bring the best of his knowledge and experience and be the change agent in the village.

Sureshbhai leveraged social media to ensure information reached the citizens to increase their participation in various programmes. These included mediums such as use of loud speakers at religious places, voice messages using own voice, SMS texts in Gujarati, Whatsapp groups, public notice boards and Facebook.

The meetings usually have an open discussion about the topics & intentions. Any complaints and questions from the

“Ever since the Panchayat initiatives to include women actively began, we have started to trust them and our own voices to create change in the village. Earlier, we had no interest to participate in anything related to the Panchayat, neither were we asked to.”

Bhartiben, Community facilitator, Kunariya

citizens are welcomed and discussed. The issues raised by the citizens are taken in writing with their signature and recorded by the Panchayat office. These issues are later discussed and prioritized within the office and subsequently the execution of solutions is carried out. These solutions maybe in the form of low and no-cost programs or in forms utilizing the Panchayat funds. The regular meetings ensure that the issues are brought up again and its status discussed, holding the Panchayat accountable. The budget is also discussed in public and displayed for discussion to make the vision and intention clear to the citizens.

“Earlier, the Panchayat decisions were heavily influenced by what the elders in the village opined. The perspectives of the youth were not brought out earlier; Now, efforts to include their representation is being done. The tech-savvy youth are involved through online survey forms and social media groups. Sports, events & competitions are used as mediums to understand their inclinations. Their involvement has certainly brought speed to the outreach and surveying.”, says Chhanga.

As part of a Participatory Rural Approach exercise, a 30m radius was



Youth participation in Participatory Rural Approach (PRA) Exercise in action.

drawn and 320 people representing focus groups were asked to draw their wards with the landmarks, kucha-pakka roads and identify problem areas. The scale and interaction of the process was very engaging to the citizens and helped ease the co-ordination process. To encourage women bonding and self-confidence, events hosting games such as tug-of-war, Kabaddi, Lagori, etc along with competitions for Rotla making, singing local wedding songs and embroidery are held. These initiatives created a safe space to discuss women rights, legal provisions, schemes and raise awareness within the gathering. Such issues and concerns of today's youth are now getting integrated in the holistic planning of the Panchayat.

The Sarpanch is held accountable for any decision taken as the process is transparent and open to critique in the Sabhas. The responsibility and role of each of the citizens as stakeholders in the Sabha is visible.

Raising awareness through innovative means

Kanthkot Gram Panchayat, Bhachau block

“Our village has the trend of public gathering opportunities during festivals like Janmashtami and Ram Navami. We use these platforms also as opportunities to spread awareness about community oneness and disseminating messages with a positive cause. Our role as the Panchayat is to not only to fight the community battles of social injustice but also to empower communities in such a way that they find their own ways to tackle them.”

Khengarbhai Sanghar, Upsarpanch, Kanthkot Gram Panchayat

Bhil is one of the few communities which have been practicing early child marriage., Previously a nomadic community, Bhils have always been associated with living in the forests and only recently settled in separated parts of the villages. Today, they are a relatively small percentage of population coming under the Scheduled Tribe category and are involved in daily labour selling cattle feed and vegetables in the daily markets. Young girls are usually not allowed to study beyond class 5 and are married off between ages 14 to 17 years. The lack of education and poverty is associated with the continuation of this practice. Kanthkot Gram Panchayat realized the need to work on some of these social issues that are deeply rooted. The way out of these could not be one-sided and had to include members from the community to become social influencers. The Panchayat ensured that the community leaders were made aware of the



Discussing the issue of Early Child Marriage in Kanthkot Gram Sabha



Students from government school performing street play to raise awareness on Early Child Marriage

necessity of these efforts, so that they might be able to effectively convince the people. The Panchayat is of the strong opinion that an educational foundation among the youth is the long-term solution to preventing early child marriage.

The first step taken by the Gram Panchayat was to discuss on the impact of child marriage within the Gram Sabha. And this was followed by several awareness programs being held in the village on child marriage and its outcomes. A resolution was passed in the Gram Sabha held last year, that Kanthkot as a village will completely get rid of early child marriage cases.

An innovative step taken by the Gram Panchayat in Kanthkot has been the use of street plays to engage the citizens. On national holidays such as Republic Day, Independence Day and Gandhi Jayanti, all the villagers are invited for celebrations at the public chowk

or Panchayat office. Children studying at the government school perform and raise awareness of the various social issues that the village experiences. The fact that Kanthkot's children raise these topics and not outsiders increases its impact and sensitivity. The children from various communities through these theatre medium can then empathize and learn not to indulge in these practices themselves. Moreover, watching their children perform becomes an anchor for various families (who might have otherwise been disinterested) to attend Panchayat programs. The results of these practices on physical and mental health on individuals and on communities are emphasized.

These interactive programs have generally increased awareness about the social issues across communities. No cases of early child marriage have been reported in the recent past and this can be attributed to the efforts of the Panchayat.

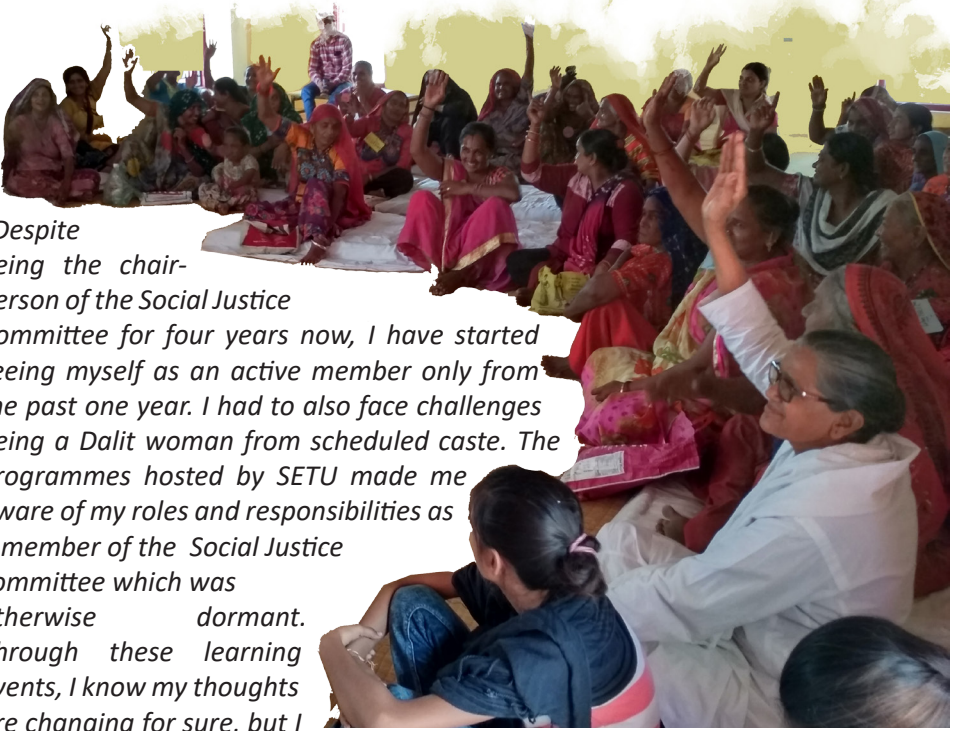
Enabling access to Social Justice- efforts of SJC members *Bhachau block, Kachchh district*

"I've been the chairman of the Social Justice Committee (SJC) of Ner Amarsar Village for a year now, and because of my experience as Sarpanch earlier, I also understand the importance of raising social issues usually ignored by the Gram panchayat. The Panchayat takes up issues related to infrastructure- streetlights, roads, gutter lines, etc more readily than social issues. Issues such as child marriage are usually considered personal; something to be solved within the community and not to be interfered by the Panchayat. We are a 3 member team, who meet once in 3 months and report the various issues observed. Since a year, we have been trying to empower women to know their rights and raise issues in public. The challenge lies in women also reinforcing prejudices upon themselves. Issues especially related to early child marriage and girls' education, needs our attention. We're also trying to promote active participation, especially among women in the Panchayat process, for which there needs to be effort from both the Panchayat and the citizens."

Jagabhai Hamirbhai Vaghela, Chairperson, Ner Amarser Group Panchayat, Block Bhachau and Chairperson, Federation of Gram Panchayat SJC, Bhachau Block



Meeting of Federation of Gram Panchayat SJC



“Despite being the chair-

person of the Social Justice Committee for four years now, I have started seeing myself as an active member only from the past one year. I had to also face challenges being a Dalit woman from scheduled caste. The programmes hosted by SETU made me aware of my roles and responsibilities as a member of the Social Justice committee which was otherwise dormant.

Through these learning events, I know my thoughts are changing for sure, but I am also ensuring my fellow committee members attend the meetings with me so that we may all grow together.

Although I had been requesting an official SJC meeting earlier, it was ignored. I realized it was my duty to ensure that the process occurs, and wrote a letter stating my dissatisfaction to a higher authority at the block Panchayat level. This changed things because the Gram Panchayat was now accountable to show on record about these meetings. We had our first meeting in December 2019, where we discussed the work related to pension schemes of widows and senior citizens. For the next meeting, the five of us committee members have started identifying issues, especially related to women. Girls’ education especially among the under privileged communities is most important and we have to ensure that scholarships are reaching them. If we don’t raise these issues and force the Panchayat to look at it, who will?”

Ratiben Karsanbhai Badhiya, Chairperson, Social Justice Committee,, Nani Chirai Gram Panchayat, Bhachau Block.

SETU Abhiyan

SETUs, under the aegis of Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan emerged as cluster level facilitation centers post the 2001 earthquake. After a decade of facilitating development initiatives in the region, SETU got registered in 2014 as SETU Abhiyan, The organization presently covers 5 blocks in Kachchh district, Gujarat, through its 8 centers. SETU Abhiyan functions with the prime objective of enabling local government bodies and citizens to enhance their access to knowledge systems, perspectives, learning opportunities and other resources by which they can improve their capacities for decentralized governance.

Learning Lab for Local Governance (SLL)

The Learning Lab for Local Governance (SETU Learning Lab), SETU Abhiyan, is an incubator of ideas and initiatives to strengthen the value of local governance in the public domain. It undertakes and facilitates documentation, research and learning events in partnership with local governance institutions, civil society organizations and academia.



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