

13th Shodhyatra: Witnessing the Ebb and Flow of Time



The sights and sounds of the sea provided an invigorating backdrop for the 13 Shodhyatra which was pursued from May 1 to May 8, 2004, in Jamnagar district of Gujarat. After walking 2,200 km in hilly and sandy terrains, this was the first time that the Shodhyatris undertook a journey in a coastal region. There were many other firsts like the time when Shodhyatris met three centurions – a husband, his wife and his sister – in one family. The Shodhyatris realized that the local communities were leading a precarious existence. The increasing entry of the salty sea water onto the shore coupled with brackish groundwater had affected farming. The fishermen had to contend with a large industrial house that had encroached upon the waters where they were accustomed to fishing.

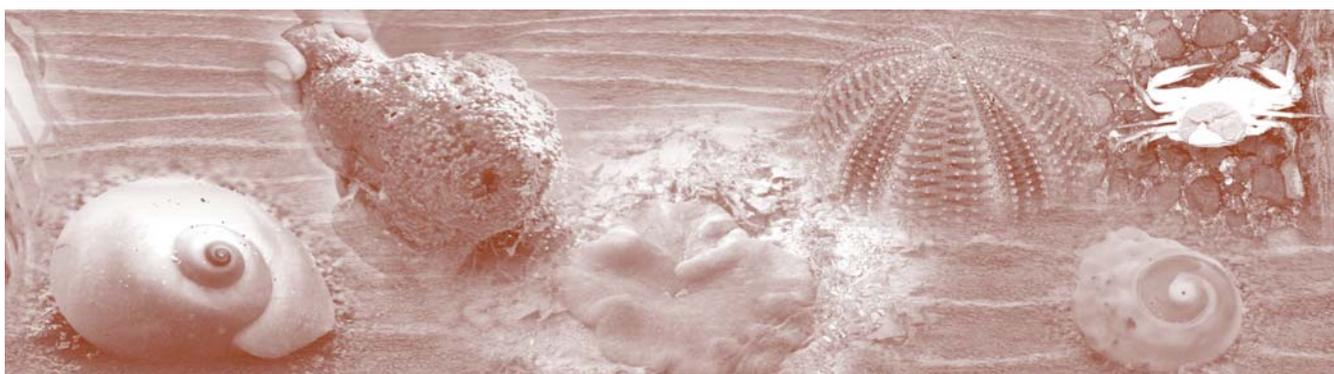
Water is essential for human life. But for those who depend on it for their livelihood, it becomes a leitmotif of their existence. The forty odd Shodhyatris who made the journey from Nana Ambla to Balachadi in coastal Gujarat (May 1-8, 2004) had the unique opportunity of exploring and understanding this close interface between man and nature in a setting where water was the presiding deity. The fishermen and workers in the salt farms needed its benevolence as much as the farmers and the other local inhabitants. Traditional knowledge in these areas was rooted in this milieu and so were the problems faced by the local communities. The 13th Shodhyatra was particularly significant in that sense. The Shodhyatris could learn from and felicitate traditional knowledge holders who often represented a past that seemed to be rapidly slipping away and also understand the present situation, its pitfalls and potentials.

The flora and fauna

The visit to Narara bet (Narara island) which is renowned for its distinctive marine flora and fauna was definitely one of the highlights of the Shodhyatra. Particularly intriguing was the giant sea animal (*Stichodactyla gigantea*) which lived in shallow waters. It looked like a big green flower and was in fact, called sea flower in this region. When touched, it would curl into itself and go beneath the water totally.

The Shodhyatris saw corals in different, vibrant colours. However, increasing pollution had begun to affect the coral and the octopuses found in this region. Dead coral which take on a greyish tinge were becoming a common sight.

But there was something to cheer about. *Cher (Avicennia marina)* which had once been present in abundance on the



island, was making a comeback. Forest officer M N Joshi spoke about the afforestation drive. This involved placing seeds of *cher* in pots. The pots were filled with the soil brought to the surface by *gulla*, an animal that makes tunnels in the ground. The pots were placed on the shore where they could be easily reached by the waves. The seeds thus received the salty water of the sea which was beneficial for their growth. As the plant grew, its roots would break the pot. The plant would then continue to grow with its roots going deeper into the soil. This method had been used for the first time three years ago and had proved to be very effective.

We were also shown foker fish, locally known as *phako* or *dhongi*. This fish had poisonous teeth. It was considered a delicacy in China and Japan.

On the way to Sachana village, the *Shodhyatris* saw light pink flamingoes that filled the sky. It was an enthralling sight. However, a visit to a bird sanctuary situated near Khijadiya village proved to be disappointing. The sanctuary was famous for migratory birds but these came only in the winter season.

Salt of the earth

Proximity to the sea made salt making units a common sight in this region. One would often come across *bunds* where the sea water was trapped to provide salt which would be collected and stored in huge piles on the shore.

In many places, pumps had been installed. These could



Girls welcoming the *Shodhyatris* at Bed village

draw the water deeper into the shore. However, the increased presence of salty water on the shores and inland areas had compounded the problem of brackish water in this region (see box on p. 11).

A memorable welcome

Shodhyatris experienced the warmth and hospitality of the local communities. Particularly memorable was the festive welcome at Bed village. Villagers played *dhol*, *nagade* and *shehnai* (all musical instruments). Small girls dressed in their traditional finery ushered the *Shodhyatris* into the village.

Sharing learnings

In village Nana Ambla, Ismailbhai Ibrahimbhai Gajan, a veterinary healer, shared his knowledge of herbal treatments with the *Shodhyatris*. Ismailbhai, who was

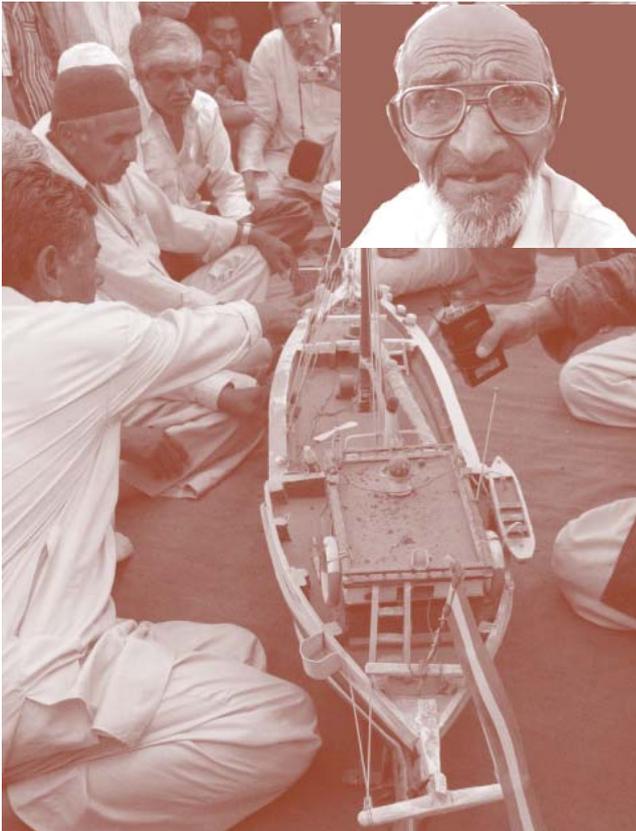


more than 100 years old, bemoaned the extinction of many herbal plant species. He said that this was affecting treatment procedures. Ismailbhai's humility and

willingness to share was remarkable and this was true of other traditional knowledge holders that we met.

In Sarmat village, we met Heerabhai Muljibhai Bhambhi. A veterinary healer, he belonged to a lower caste. He had been taught by a Rajput. It was unusual for a high caste Rajput to have groomed a lower caste disciple.

Much of the knowledge that was shared in Sikka village



Ahmedbhai Gandar (inset) and a model of a boat that he had made

was related to fishing. Abbasbhai Mahmoodbhai said that *saag* (*Tectona grandis*) and *baval* (*Acacia nilotica*) were used in making boats. Oil from the *siya* fish was applied on the wood to make it stronger.

In the same village, we met Ahmedbhai Gandar who makes models of boats. This is his hobby. He displayed one of his models in the meeting.

Fishermen spoke about increasing water pollution which was killing the fishes and also about other difficulties faced by them. Subsequent meetings in other villages showed that many of these were common problems in the region (see box on p.11).

In Rasulpura village, fishermen spoke about the different varieties of commonly found fishes, such as *dantiya* (or

dantaro, *Psettodes erumei*) and *kunga* (*Scombridae* spp.) However, *fala*, *bhar* and *chacharani* had become rare.

In Nava Nagana village, the *Shodhyatris* were asked if they knew some way of repelling *nilgai* (blue bull). Ramesh Patel said that a solution made from *nilgai*'s dung could be sprayed on the margins of the fields. Alternately, pots filled with buttermilk (10-12 days old) could be placed at some interval in the fields. In both cases, the smell might repel the *nilgai*, as reported by the readers of *Loksarvani* from north Gujarat.



Centurions Ayubhai, his wife Ayesha and sister Alima

Valuing repositories of knowledge

For the first time, *Shodhyatris* met three centurions in a family in Sikka village. Ayubhai Hussainbhai Kungada, the patriarch of the family, was 117 years old. His wife Haajiyan Ayesha Ayub Kungada was 102 years old while his sister Alima Ayubhai Kakkhar was 107 years old. Ayubhai had been a fisherman. He had also been involved in exporting coal and other commodities. Ayubhai, his wife and sister were felicitated in their house. Ayubhai mentioned that earlier they used to fish for *gadhari* and *amrus*. These fishes weighed 20-30 kg. However, these



Ameenaben (inset) helped us meet five centurion women in Bedi village. Five Centurion: (1) Amnaben Isabbhai Pathan (2) Gangaben Lavjibhai Ladhani (3) Fatmaben Jaku Kureshi (4) Mariamben Isabbhai Chamaria and (5) Mariamben Aadambhai Hingora

had now become almost extinct. He himself had stopped fishing 30 years back. His son was a government employee. No one in the family now worked as a fisherman. In Singach village, we felicitated woman centurion Deviben Bhimabhai Lakum. She spoke about first aid and treatments for animal disorders and diseases. The *Shodhyatris* had the good fortune of being able to meet five centurion women in Bedi village.

Discovering local innovations

At Gagawa village, we learnt about a new variety of wheat grown by three farmers. Called *puttariya*, this variety could grow in hard black soil. The wheat grain spike (*umbi*) had a somewhat rectangular shape.



Parshottambhai (inset) and his electrical pin making machine

Its nutritional value was said to be high. The farmers said that pests did not attack the grains if they were stored along with the husk. However, separating the grain from the husk required much effort and that was why this variety was not very popular. We met Parshottambhai Laujibhai Parmar in Nava Nagna village and saw his innovation - a machine that made pins used in plugs for electrical devices. Parshottambhai's machine could make 600-700 gross pins a day (one gross=144). Only one person was required to operate the machine. He had sold 20-25 machines priced at Rs 14,000. He had made this machine 15 years ago. He did not know anything about patent and his design was copied by many people. Productivity had increased. The price of pins came down. But his economic condition remained the same.

Alibhai Abhvani of Sarmat village showed *resham patto*, a new variety of chilli that he had developed. He had earlier won a consolation prize in the second competition organized by NIF in 2002.

Hope for the future

In Bed village, Kishorbhai Gordhan-bhai Songara of class



IX, was able to identify 190 plants and their uses. He stood first in the biodiversity contest for children held in his village as part of the *Shodhyatra*. In all, 1100 children participated in the biodiversity contests held in their villages. The 34 winners, including 16 girls, were awarded certificates.

Shodhyatris met Ameenaben Chamaria, sarpanch of Bedi village. Confident and articulate, she ensured that the meeting in her village went off well.

Of endings and beginnings

The ending of every *Shodhyatra* is also the beginning of another journey, that is, the journey within. The purpose is to identify what one would do after the collective exploration. Will the agonies of fishermen make one cynical, or will the stories of their struggles inspire us? Will the saga of the organic farmers' association in Jamnagar led by Nileshbhai Dave spur similar efforts in other regions of Gujarat as well as the country? When we honoured *Shodhyatri* Vallabhai Butani, a senior organic farmer, we tried to remind ourselves of the youthful spirit that lay behind his experiments. Then again, the case of Harishbhai was quite ironic. The biggest distributor of chemical pesticides in the district, he had an amazing organic farm of his own where he never used any chemicals. Ameenaben, the head of village council of Bedi village had brought a blind 60 year old, fisherfolk Abbasbhai Harunbhai Manikbhai to the concluding ceremony. We had not been able to meet him when we had gone to Bedi village. Abbasbhai was adept not only in fishing, but also in reciting folk stories in verse with great effect. The story of Kaasambhai, a famous navigator, brought tears to many eyes. When the first steamer powered by generator had come to the Jamanagar shores, local fishermen had been quite curious about its safety and success in catching fish in the deep sea. The owner of the steamer was quite a daredevil. He was proud of all the gadgets he had on board. Once when there was serious storm looming on the horizon, he wanted Kaasambhai to come and navigate the steamer. Kaasambhai advised against the expedition. The owner did not listen and the steamer never came back. It sank. The old folk song reminds everybody that the knowledge of the fisherfolks that evolved over generations still matters. But who cares?

Present imperfect

These are difficult times for the local communities residing in the coastal areas of Gujarat. Not only do they have to deal with the age old vagaries of nature, but also with man-made problems.



An agitated fisherman Abdul Kaasam Nepani of Sikka village narrating his woes

- A large industrial house with a sizeable presence in the region would tear their nets whenever it felt they were fishing in the part of the sea on which it claimed property rights. No skill upgradation or alternative employment opportunities were provided to the local communities by the industrial house. In fact, unemployment was a common problem in most villages.

- Decline in the number of fishes both in terms of variety and catch had affected their livelihood. Water pollution was stated as the main reason for the decline.
- Sometimes because of strong winds, the fishermen inadvertently strayed into Pakistani waters. The fishermen felt that the Indian and the Pakistani government should look at such cases differently and resolve them in a co-operative manner.
- The government gave loans and subsidies to farmers. Such facilities were not provided to fishermen and others who depend on the sea for their livelihood.
- The fishermen had to pay fees for visiting Pirotan, a pilgrimage spot. They felt that they should be exempted from this fee.
- Once the fishermen ventured out into the sea, there was no way of communicating with the people on shore as the use of mobile phones was banned.
- Proximity to the salty water of the sea had made the groundwater brackish. Deep drilling had caused sea water to ingress and this had affected water in the wells. Drinking water had become a major problem.
- Brackish water had affected the fertility of the soil and productivity had gone down
- The workers in the salt farm usually developed ulcers and warts on their legs, suffered from heat stroke and skin problems. Sunlight reflected off the salt crystals could even cause blindness.



Fishermen returning from the sea with their nets