

## Educational Reconstruction in Kutch: The Shodhyatra with a Difference



*January 26th 2001: Gujarat will forever remember this day of nature's ire. On this day the earth heaved and left in its wake grieving families, fallen buildings and broken dreams. Towns and villages which a day before had been full of life were reduced to pile of rubble. One of the worst affected areas was Kutch where the towns of Anjar and Bhachao were almost completely devastated. At the time of our summer Shodhyatra, June 2001, the people of Kutch had still not recovered from the after effects of the devastating earthquake. With that thought in mind we decided to take our Shodhyatra to the villages of Kutch and focus particularly on Education and Shram Arpan (contributing by physical labour). The focus thus was on Shram, Shiksha and Shodh (labour, education and Innovation).*

### Activities of Shodhyatra

The seventh Shodhyatra was organised from Dabhuda to Sarasla in Rapar Taluka of Kutch, from June 16 to June 23, 2001. Fifteen villages were covered in this Shodhyatra and in eight villages of this cluster, 13 rooms for primary schools were built with the help of SRISTI and IIM-A CORE. Small libraries were also created in 10 villages and many books, including fourteen volumes of Gujarati Encyclopedia (Vishwakosh), were donated to set up the library. Educational toys, pencils, rubbers, notebooks and other materials were distributed in all the primary schools. In ten villages, the Shodhyatra participants planted trees together with the villagers. Meetings, discussions and bio-diversity contests were held in the villages to develop children's interest in education. We learned about extraordinary knowledge of local people regarding agriculture, veterinary, development of farm implements and other rural skills.

### Communicating with the Villagers

A remarkable contribution was made by Mr. Ramanlal Soni (Village: Tintoi, Tal: Modasa, Dist: Sabarkantha), a retired school teacher, towards creation of education awareness through his own poems, stories and songs. With excellent communication skills, he managed to catch hold of peoples' attention using songs and stories, and make them understand the importance of education. He shamed women in Khanpar by asking them, whether they were factories for producing cheap labour for others. After a stunning silence, the desired effect was noticed. Villagers began to question their beliefs and practices contributing to illiteracy apart from economic factors.

### The Village Teacher

We met Mavjibhai Arjunbhai Parmar, a young man, in Sarasla village. This is a scarcely



*Women meeting at Pichana villag*

populated village, with only two literate people. The village is devoid of basic facilities like electricity and transportation. A teacher had been appointed by the Government, but he seldom came to the school. Mavjibhai then volunteered to conduct the classes himself and help the students learn to read and write. Impressed by this young man's gesture SRISTI announced financial support for the young teacher for a year.

### **Cooking Competition**

A recipe contest was held in Pichana village where 16 women took part. This particular competition was different from the normal ones because firstly the recipes had to include at least one uncultivated plant as their ingredients and secondly the best recipes were cooked by two sisters. We were not aware of this fact as throughout the contest, the two sisters had been sitting apart. It was clear from the pride in their mother's eyes, what kind of values she had instilled in them to outperform everyone else in the village.



*Many Contestant in contest at Pichana village*



*A contestant in winning prize during Recipe contest at Pichana village*

### **Fasting for School Enrollment**

In Naliya timba village we noticed that the number of girl students was very small. The shodhyatris requested all the villagers to admit their children to school, but it was very hard to convince them. Finally the yatris decided that they would not eat until all the children below the age of ten were admitted to school. This created a vital impact on the villagers and by 10 p.m. fifty new children were admitted to the school with a special 'tilak' ceremony. An educational committee comprising three village elders was set up to ensure that all the children attend the school regularly. We were able to enroll almost 400, new and old students, during the eight days of walk.

### **Rebuilding the School**

It was obvious that the regions rich in biodiversity were also the lowest in literacy level as was the case here. It was decided to follow up the yatra by replicating an experiment successfully conducted by Gantar (a Ahmedabad based NGO). Sukhdevbhai of Gantar found that illiteracy of young kids was caused in large measure because farmers had to migrate out in search of seasonal work every year. The children did not go to school. Gantar persuaded the migrants to leave behind their kids, leave some house

open to serve as hostel and also some ration for kids. They were able to mobilize few teachers to take care of the children. The result was that without any new infrastructure, the literacy level was improved. SRISTI is trying to replicate this model in Rapar. The time duration of this project is eight months. SRISTI and IIM-A CORE will spend the funds received as donations during the relief work for reviving the worst affected schools. The schools without physical facilities will be provided help for infrastructure so that they may start functioning again; children who have left the school may be re-enrolled; and awareness may finally be created among the parents and society at large.

