Where AMBITION MEETS REALITY

Salman Rashid

community WORLD service ASIA
peace resilience dignity

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Authored by

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DEDICATION

For the desert people of Sindh who despite
great odds strive for a better future

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THE HISTORY

Legend has it that it was a Rajput chieftain, Amar by name, who established the fort of Umerkot at a very remote time in the past and for a long time it was known as Amarkot – Eternal Fort. History does not have much on that. It only tells us that one Parmar Sodha of Ujjain, moved into this part of the desert and having displaced the Soomra ruler of Umerkot, established himself in the castle.

It was his descendant Rana Vairsal who played host to Humayun in 1542 when the Mughal fled before Sher Shah Suri. Time passed, and in the eighteenth century the Kalhoras replaced the Sodha Rajputs in Umerkot. Thereafter, Umerkot suffered a plundering raid at the hands of the Madad Khan of Kandahar before it passed into the relative but short-lived peace of Talpur reign.

In 1843, the British had replaced the Talpurs in Sindh. Strangely, even though Umerkot lay on the trade highroad from Shikarpur in the north to Kutch[1] by the sea, it was neglected while other parts of Thar received significant British attention. In the last two centuries, Umerkot was just another town of

1 *Historically known as* **Kingdom of Kutch**, *was a kingdom in the* ***Kutch*** *region from 1147 to 1819 and a princely state under British rule from 1819 to 1947. Bordered by* ***Sindh*** *in the north, Cutch State was one of the few princely states with a coastline.*

the district of 'Thurr and Parkar' as British officials knew it. The western part of the district gained some little from British-built irrigation off the Nara Canal, while on the east the desert sprawled virtually untouched by the march of time.

In 1993, Umerkot was established as a district. However, in 2000, this new district was abolished and re-merged with Mirpur Khas only to be established all over again in 2004. With four talukas (sub-divisions), the district of Umerkot is among the poorest in Sindh. While the western sub-divisions are somewhat better off being in the irrigated part, the eastern parts are as disadvantaged as any in the Thar Desert.

Though these communities have lived in this area since the time the Hakra[2] flowed to green the entire region, their ancestors gradually acclimatised to increasingly arid conditions with the drying out of the 'Lost River'. That life-changing event occurred some four thousand years ago but life continued to be nurtured by the summer monsoon. Long before the dreaded phrase 'climate change' hit the world, Thar was blessed with regular rains and seasonal crops grew. But since the mid-1980s rainfall has been irregular with a couple of good years every five or six years. Of late, the good years have become rarer and rarer. For the people of Thar, drought is not only a total lack of rain; it is also untimely rains that cause the sowed seed to wither away without sprouting.

Farmers who could be called prosperous in the desert setting only five decades ago, were reduced to sharecroppers who migrated seasonally to the irrigated parts of the district to work for cash. Others became day labourers on construction sites and in factories in Hyderabad and Karachi. But labour is irregular

2 *Today, the* **Hakra** *is the dried-out channel of a river near Fort Abbas City in Pakistan that is the continuation of the Ghaggar River in India.*

and they are fortunate who found daily work. At home, hunger and want stalked their loved ones.

In the past four decades, migration in the face of drought has been a regular bane for desert communities. Since no one had ever intervened to teach them methods of mitigating the effects of natural disasters, they suffered huge losses in terms of livestock and sometimes even human lives on the long trudge westward to the irrigated farmlands where they could find work.

If the women of Thar are particularly gifted with the needle and thread, the men are equally good on the loom. Handicrafts coming out of the desert are therefore as much in demand outside the district as they are in the villages. But poor, marginalised and illiterate, these master artisans are disadvantage by an absence of marketing strategy or technique. No surprise then that even the finest of their work goes unfairly under-priced whether it is picked up within the community or by the greedy middleman.

As any other neglected district, Umerkot suffers from poor education and lack of health facilities. Schools in far-flung villages remain deserted for want of a teacher. Where local entrepreneurs have established private educational institutions, most desert families lack the means to enrol their children. Then again, even available teachers are utterly lacking in modern teaching techniques. If children drop out of school because of migration in times of natural disasters or during harvest time, there is perhaps an equal number that leaves out of boredom.

The least said of health facilities, the better. In a word: taluka headquarter hospitals are woefully understaffed. If not that, then out-of-town doctors prefer to stay away. In need of

medical attention, large numbers of deserving persons end up squandering hard earned money on private healthcare. No surprise then that there is no dearth of disadvantaged families in heavy debt incurred by such expenditures.

Marginalised as much by poverty as by their illiteracy, whole communities are invisible to the world outside their desert villages. They have no voice that can be heard and that is because they are not organised as communities. Here in the desert, it is every man for himself. If there was something these communities needed more than anything else, it was a voice and visibility.

The drought that has loomed over Thar Desert since 2010 has grown intense, virtually bringing to their knees the descendants of those proud people who created the cities of the ancient Indus Valley. In the past decade, they have been reduced to utter penury and desperation, yet they have tenaciously clung to their land and their ancient way of life. It was in this distressing situation that Community World Service Asia (CWSA) stepped in to help. With financial assistance from partners all over the world, CWSA has given hope where very little was left. In so doing, this initiative has co-opted government agencies as they had never been before.

The following lines tell the stories of these initiative in the words of people who have been supported. Here are no statistics, no figures; here are human stories that highlight the tenacity of a people who have braved hardship for a very, very long time. These stories are based on their very own words. The last part of this section is really the proverbial stitch in time provided by CWSA interventions. It is strange that such remarkable women had waited so long to be discovered.

THE STORIES

OLD FURNITURE RENEWED

We were like old furniture. The CWSA training polished and renewed us,' says teacher Naila of Government Girls Primary School (GGPS), Kunri Memon outside Umerkot. One of thirty schools with whose teachers CWSA is working since start of the programme in 2018, GGPS now boasts of students not wishing to go home after the last bell rings.

Principal Shahida Parveen says that as government school teachers, they are provided a one-time training which has not changed since the founding of Pakistan. Government school teachers have no recognition of the fact that a kindergarten child cannot be handled the same way as an older one. Moreover, the government training is even today purely theoretical where the trainers' attitude towards teachers is poor. Even after the proclamation of a government policy for separate Early Childhood Education schools in 2018, no actual change occurred nor did any specialised training take place. Not until CWSA focussed on Early Childhood Care and Education training for the teachers it worked with.

This was the first training that introduced teachers to the concept of being friends with their pupils. As well as that, this was also the first time it was impressed upon the teachers

that their wards are a critical responsibility. Since 2020, when CWSA began work with this school, the usual practice for teachers and auxiliary staff is to ensure that every single student has left the premises before they themselves exit and lock up. The principal has also designed a programme for students, particularly girls, of the same locality to walk home as a group. This was necessitated after a spate of harassment and fear among parents of possible kidnapping.

'Though I am a teacher by choice, even then I lacked this sense of responsibility,' says Shahida Parveen. In her view, this is because of an inherent flaw in teachers' training methods. She wonders why a private organisation can come up with innovation while the government cannot.

However, the best coming out of the training is the concept of using material such as toys and colour sets. According to the principal this was the first time the school had received such training materials and in ample quantity too. It was also a first for kindergarten students to use water colours with their hands to produce art. The result was amazing for that was when kindergarten students refused to leave school after the last bell.

Equally remarkable was the effect on senior students who left their science books in their satchels to be shown how seeds germinate in glass bottles and how plants grow. The understanding was far greater than hours of poring over textbooks as followed earlier. Indeed, so great was the interest of the students that with changing seasons, they came to school with different seeds to experiment with. Today some of the younger trees in the school compound are those planted by the students.

As word got around, enrolment at GGPS shot up with students leaving private and expensive schools to enrol where 'real teaching' took place. Some of these new students are in higher grades and will soon graduate to middle school, their younger siblings have joined in kindergarten. Better still, this school which like all others had a regular seasonal absentee rate because of chilli or cotton picking where children assist their parents has not had a single such case in the one year since CWSA engagement. Nor too has it had any dropouts which normally occurred when children absented themselves during the picking seasons and never returned to school.

Subsequent to the reopening of the school after the Covid-19 epidemic subsided, CWSA repaired the partially functioning toilet facility and provided a water tank and an ongoing supply of soap. But the project will end one day, so from where will the soap then be obtained? Principal Shahida Parveen notes that in less than a year, the hand washing habit has so become ingrained that children will not give it up and the school will make availability of soap from its own resources.

When school reopened following the abatement of the Covid-19 outbreak, the School Management Committee invited mothers to a meeting. This again was a first for mothers to see for themselves how the school was functioning. For the first time mothers felt involved in school and this found expression when those of them who worked as seamstresses at home, presented the school with fifty masks crafted from left over materials.

Young Fiza is a student of grade four in the school whose mother is a housewife and father runs a cigarette and paan kiosk in town. Both parents are illiterate. She says she wants to be a doctor so that she can provide free treatment to the poor. But it is the joy one sees in the eyes of her mother Khanzadi Joiya when she recounts the pleasure she feels when her daughter reads the written word appearing on the television screen. A whole new world has opened up for the couple.

Fiza's twin elder brothers attend a nearby middle school in grade six. That institution is untouched by the revolutionary teachers training. Khanzadi says that while one of the boys wants to join the army, the other one shows no ambition at all. It is a stark comparison with the younger sister who, going through a better educational system, has lofty aspirations lacking in her brothers.

With one voice the principal and her colleagues say that following the training they have shed all harshness. Students are now like family to them and this change has positively affected their own parenting at home as well.

The four-day teachers training by CWSA is clearly a watershed moment in the life of this school. One can only hope the model is followed elsewhere by government institutions as well.

CREATING AMBITIONS

Qabool Soomro Government Primary School at Dhoro Naro bears the name of the man who donated part of his property for the school premises. This was just another government school until teacher Jafar who has been with the institution since 2010 attended CWSA trainings on Early Childhood Care and Education, Covid-19 SOPs and Science education. While the entire training was very useful, it was the session on Covid-19 that changed his outlook towards the virus. 'I did not take the threat seriously. It was only after the training that I fully understood implications of carelessness in dealing with one's personal hygiene,' he says.

He also admits that their method of science education was incorrect. 'We had charts and the blackboard. Students were forced to memorise the charts or what we wrote on the board,' he says. Since retention was through memorisation without real understanding, there were never any questions in class. But after the training, Jafar and his colleague Abdul Ghani introduced practical experimentation in class. There was nothing fancy, says Ghani. Just a clear plastic bottle filled with soil and sprinkled with seeds to show how they sprouted and how the plant developed. Two notable changes occurred. First, there was a flow of questions from the students. Interaction between students too increased on the subject. Secondly,

examination sheets of the class that first did these experiments showed a distinct difference from preceding years. Their answers indicated understanding of the subject rather than a rote-learned response.

Ghani and Jafar recount that the Early Childhood Care and Education training was a great learning for them. 'Children are naturally creative. When we moved away from textbooks and gave them simple items like clay and a few colours, they produced what can only be called masterpieces for children of five or six years of age,' says Jafar. This had never been done in this school, or, so far as the teachers knew, in any other institution. The prize was the pleasure of the little artists when their work was displayed in school for some days. The children later insisted on taking their art home to show to their families and friends.

The school Health Club initiative and the supply of soap for the washroom in tandem with hygiene lectures has turned the eighty students very conscious of personal cleanliness. Young Areeba of grade four appears to have a special knack for languages because she says she enjoys Sindhi, Urdu and English lessons the most. But she wants to be a doctor when she grows up so that she can cure every one of the Corona virus. As a member of the Health Club she knows that germs cause illness and in this age of the

Covid-19 pandemic it is essential to use soap and water to keep the virus at bay. Clearly, that is a good doctor in the making.

Chetan Kumar who runs a store in Dhoro Naro has grandchildren of his own and of his brother's in this school. They number ten in all. Speaking to one of them, Aman of grade three, one learns that he looks forward to the next grade when science education will begin. His dream is to be an engineer because he heard some elders in the family speaking of one such professional who 'constructs building and houses'.

However, the most interesting was young Munawar Ali of grade five who likes to paint and draw. His proudest production is a depiction of the story of Marvi, the desert maiden and Umar Soomro, the king of Umerkot, a story etched on the mind of every self-aware Sindhi. Asked if he did such work earlier he says he was too young and it is only now that drawing materials are available in school.

However, an artist is not what Munawar Ali wants to be as a grown up. He wishes to study law and be a judge so that he can 'bring justice to all'. He is very clear in his mind that he will favour no one, not even his family and friends and that he will only dispense justice.

One thought government schools where corporal punishment was once the norm and where ambitions died early could not produce such dreams. Teacher Jafar admits it is a growing trend among pupils in his school to talk of the profession they would like to follow in life. In his view, the new methods of teaching learned during their own training with CWSA have made the difference.

The Social Welfare Department Lends a Voice

When you want every voice to count against child marriage, gender-based violence, education for all and other social issues, you face problems, says Kiran Bashir of Community World Service Asia (CWSA). The common refrain that she and her team of field workers met with repeatedly was: there are so many problems in the world and you people are clamouring about your perceived wrong in child marriage or wife beating.

Such was the beginning of the programme Every Voice Counts. But where there were detractors and uninterested officials, Saroop Chand, the Deputy Director, Social Welfare Department at the district headquarters of Umerkot was another kind of person. His speech slightly slurred by a recent stroke, the man is yet a dedicated and energetic worker who led the district in the EVC programme from the front. Though Saroop Chand has been with the department for nearly seven years in two stints, he says when the CWSA programme began in 2018, the somnolent department was suddenly galvanised.

Focussing on five of the forty-two union councils in the district, he says he and his team did something that had never been done before: accompanying the CWSA team, they went from village to village in the five union councils to raise awareness

on the Every Voice Counts programme. Forming the District Engagement Group, he led the coordination with civil society representatives to lobby with government departments both in the district and the provincial capital city of Karachi for pro-women laws and eradication of child marriage. The first and most vital role played by the District Engagement Group was awareness raising on these issues by publishing articles in the press.

Seeing that the District Engagement Group was not sufficient to keep an effective eye around, Saroop Chand played a part beyond his mandate in the formation of the District Monitoring Committee. When the deputy commissioner said it was not in his purview to notify such a committee and that the needful would have to be referred to the concerned department in the provincial secretariat, Saroop Chand approached the secretary and surely it was his passion that got Secretary Aliya Shahid to sign the notification on the first and only meeting with her.

The monitoring committee was thus in place chaired by the deputy commissioner and comprising such members as the superintendent of police, a number of lawyers, Social Welfare Department, religious leaders, representatives of the Local Government, Education and Health departments and civil society activists. This became a powerful tool with eyes and ears everywhere in the focus union councils. Today, besides the District Monitoring Committee, the deputy commissioner also chairs a Women's Welfare Department with a similar composition.

This made for a concerted effort that led to the thwarting of seven underage marriages and registration of First Information

Reports with concerned police stations against erring families. Furthermore, from 2019 to 2021, no fewer than two dozen ceremonies have been stopped while in progress. Says Saroop Chand that in most cases, the parents were not aware of the law against child marriage. And where they were, they preferred to ignore it especially if 'selling' a daughter meant monetary boost for a needy family. Though sometimes the clergy presiding over ceremonies were also unaware of the law, there were those who, despite being fully cognisant of it, yet solemnised underage marriages for a few rupees.

Through its National Lobbying Delegation, CWSA advocated extensively at the national and provincial level for the enactment and passage of the (Federal) Hindu Marriage Act 2017 and the Sindh Hindu Marriage Amendment Act 2018. Community World Service Asia (CWSA) also supported the provincial government of Sindh with the provision of draft rules of business to ensure efficient and effective implementation of the act within the Sindh province. At the community level, the Sindh Hindu Marriage Amendment Act 2018, was even less known to the public, says Saroop Chand. Therefore, CWSA strategically and carefully advocated through various tools with local Hindu communities who were universally unaware of the safeguards the law provided to women. Guarantees like the right to divorce, remarriage, right to property, and child custody were unknown. Indeed, to the religiously inclined, divorce and remarriage by women were repugnant. It was clear that a concerted effort was needed to make the law known and acceptable. Working in close coordination with advocate Mohammad Baksh Kumbhar, a member of the District Engagement Group, Saroop Chand led a vigorous awareness raising campaign in the five union councils.

Saroop Chand admits there was a Child Protection Unit in his department that had long remained non-functional. The unit became effective after his department's linkage with CWSA. A measure of his success in curbing anti-children crimes, Saroop Chand says that when he and Mohammad Baksh Kumbhar go around the city people remark, 'Here come the men who thwart child marriages!' This visibility is a long way forward from the time when rural people, in that rare case they wanted to report infringement, did not know where to resort; the Social Welfare Department simply did not appear on the common person's radar. This visibility and the formation of a committee to prevent child marriage in every union council of two or three villages coupled with the committee's 24/7 availability has made a marked difference in the focus area.

'Many cases of child marriage occur because until a decade or so ago, births were not registered. Consequently, the exact age of a child was unknown among illiterate rural families,' says Saroop Chand. Because of the awareness raising campaign, birth registration has increased to an extent that now virtually none escapes documentation. Additionally, the Social Welfare Department now lays greater stress on education as a means to uplift the young generation and school enrolment requires a birth certificate.

There is something unique about Saroop Chand. First, he had survived a stroke shortly before this meeting took place yet he is unfazed and full of energy. Secondly, for a government servant who should be remarkable for his phlegmatic behaviour, he is surprisingly animated and committed to his work. The question was why he was not doing earlier what he does now? He says he was doing everything he could in his capacity. But

with Every Voice Counts he was able to add his department's voice to a larger group of activists and because numbers mean effectiveness, things began to move.

The Municipal Committee of Umerkot plays a helping hand to the Social Welfare Department. Abdul Khaliq, assistant in the Committee holds dual charge of Certificate Branch that issues birth, death, residence and marriage certificates. He says that since 1964, when the Muslim Marriage Act was promulgated, the maulvi and the pundit were registered with the Certificate Branch and only such registered individuals could preside over a wedding ceremony. Interestingly, in the absence of an equivalent Hindu Marriage Act, the Committee dealt with Hindu marriages under the same law as for Muslims.

Theoretically, it was only the registered priest's certificate that was ratified by the Municipal Committee. But time passed, laxity set in and any marriage certificate submitted, even by unregulated priests, received official endorsement. Mostly, however, Hindu couples simply lived without any official record of marriage. The gravest problem in this situation was estrangement between man and wife in which case the mother had no proof of her children's parentage and could therefore not demand maintenance for them. An untold number of women with wayward husbands were thus forced into extreme circumstances and had to fend for the children single-handedly. Another problem arose in recent years with ease in travel abroad. Without a marriage certificate, a wife could not get a visa to travel with her husband.

With the passage of the Hindu Marriage Act in 2016 (and amended in 2018), the Municipal Committee has re-registered

seven of the thirty pundits in the city and the process continues. What did not help the campaign was the widespread illiteracy and ignorance concerning the law and families continued to disregard registration of marriage or childbirth. CWSA came into play and launched a massive awareness raising campaign through theatre.

The outcome was amazing, says Abdul Khaliq. There was a sudden upsurge in seeking only registered pundits to preside over wedding ceremonies and a corresponding increase of applicants in the Certificate Branch of the municipality. Pundit Lal Gir appreciates that the law bestows upon the wife the rights of divorce and remarriage that she did not have under Hindu religious law. However, even after its passage, ignorance made the law all but redundant. The theatre campaign that took the essence of the law into the homes of illiterate families has made a remarkable change. While registration of marriages had increased several fold with the Certificate Branch, the same is true for birth registration.

Abdul Khaliq points out that with ninety union council secretaries, two each from the forty-five UCs in the district, having undergone the CWSA training, the district is now much better equipped than ever before to tackle these ancient social problems. The change is slow, but there is change where none had been witnessed in the past one thousand years.

A POLICE OFFICER TO PRESERVE HOMES

'We do not break homes; we preserve them,' says Inspector Mehnaz Awan, who underwent training with CWSA and now heads the Women's Police Station at Umerkot. She was speaking on the case she had resolved the day this writer met her. Inspector Awan tells the story: the biggest curse of our society is the vutta-satta marriage where a pair of brother and sister are cross-wedded to another pair of siblings. If the marriages on both sides work, things go all right. But if one woman is sent home by her husband, the other family will forcibly remove their daughter from her husband's home even when their marriage is going fine. That is the usual proceeding.

However, in this particular case, the girl's sister-in-law left her husband, the girl's brother. After the initial attempts at reconciliation failed, the girl packed up leaving her fifteen month-old child with her husband and returned to her parents' home with her new-born baby. As her sister-in-law was not coming back to her husband, the girl, barely past her late teens, applied for divorce and the case reached the court.

Inspector Awan who has headed the Umerkot women's police station for two years since 2019 after a similar two-year stint in

Mirpur Khas, is clearly the archetypal proactive police officer. Asking time from the judge, she spent the entire morning counselling the woman. She had two little children who needed both parents and after only a few months of separation from the mother, the elder child, not yet eighteen months old, failed to recognise his mother and refused to go to her.

Inspector Awan played on this scenario and her impassioned discourse moved the girl. The inspector saw that the girl did not have issues with her husband. She had been swayed by familial pressure. Relatives had weighed in to keep the girl from her husband as long as her own sister-in-law did not return.

Using her policewoman's firmness, the inspector told the relatives to make themselves scarce and left the husband and wife alone to talk over their issues. Before the court recessed for the day, the couple had made up and appeared at the bench to affirm in front of the judge that they wished to live together as man and wife.

Some months earlier a young local woman was kidnapped from Inspector Awan's jurisdiction. Word was that she had been taken to Mirpur Khas, but a raid in that town at the reported address turned up a blank. Then it was said that she had been removed to a remote village in Rohri, 250 kilometres north of her police station.

In her police mobile van, the inspector and her crew of armed policemen reached the village in the dark at two in the morning. The girl was recovered and with her the inspector arrested the kidnapper and his mother. The case was registered, the girl returned to her parents while the kidnapper and his mother went into custody. In November 2021, the case being sub-judice, the kidnapper was still in lock up while his mother was out on bail and begging the inspector to somehow quash the case. It was clear that the mother and son team of criminals had learned their lesson.

Inspector Awan recalls that prevention of underage marriages is the major activity in her jurisdiction. In early 2021, a very poor local family sold their thirteen year-old daughter to a man of Nagarparkar more than thirty years her senior. The price that unfortunate child fetched was Rs 250,000 to be wedded to a man who being in his mid-forties had failed to find a suitable match for himself. His only achievement, if achievement it must be called, was that he was somewhat wealthier than the girl's parents.

Getting wind of the impending solemnisation of the marriage, the inspector raided the venue. Upon seeing the police, the mullah presiding over the ceremony absconded in great haste. The girl's father was arrested and the case went to court. As long as the case was under trail, the man remained in custody to repent his evil deed. Almost a year after the marriage very nearly occurred, the girl is still with her family and under Inspector Awan's strict instructions not to be married until she is eighteen years of age.

Inspector Mehnaz Awan is a police officer to be emulated, one of those who join the service to serve fellow Pakistanis. She

admits that attending the CWSA training sessions was a great help. Travelling around villages with the team of field officers made her a familiar face among the women of the district. 'This was a great help,' she says. 'In our milieu, common people are afraid of approaching the police even when they have legitimate problems. But I became known and women especially began to feel they could talk to me.'

That made things a great deal easier for complainants to come to her. The result is that in her two years in Umerkot, Inspector Awan has stopped several child marriages, thwarted kidnapping and rape cases when she heard in time, and her intervention and counselling has prevented domestic and matrimonial issues from falling apart. In 2020, her police station registered nine such cases of child marriage. In 2021, she had taken another fifteen to the courts.

As in charge of the Women and Child Protection Cell in the office of the district Superintendent of Police, Inspector Mehnaz Awan divides time between her police station and that office. Her typical workday is spent mostly in counselling complainants, building bridges between estranged families and attending court.

The inspector admits that had it not been the CWSA programme, she would not have been as recognised a face as she is now. That makes all the difference because now a victim, be she real or only so in her own imagination, is at ease approaching her. One can only wish the good Inspector Mehnaz Awan more strength.

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TWO GAME CHANGERS

Just seventeen years old and Dhelan holds remarkable promise for her tomorrow. At the local Sindh Education Foundation School, she was the topper in her class through the ten years to matriculation before she joined the degree college at Dhoro Naro. From there she took her intermediate examination and passed with flying colours as she now waits to join Sindh University, Hyderabad. She says she had always wanted to be a doctor, but that education is way too expensive for her family to afford. She has therefore resolved to get a post-graduate degree in chemistry and be a college professor.

It is remarkable that the loss of a cherished dream has brought no wistfulness in her. Dhelan has taken it in her stride; it is something that just had to be, she says. When she completes her education, she will be the first person from village Khunhar Bheel, outside Dhoro Naro town, to have reached this level of education. And how she has fought to get where she is now! When she finished middle school, her paternal uncle told her family they were wasting time and money on her education when she was bound to be wedded in a year or two and minding a home and children. Surprisingly, it was her brother at that time who stood by her in her pursuit of education and continued to support her even at the Dhoro Naro college where she shared the classroom with boys.

During her days at the college 2.5 kilometres away that she footed out and back, she would return home in the afternoon just in time for a quick bite and sometimes not even that before she headed out for her computer course. Returning home in the evening, Dhelan assembled her class of some sixty boys and girls to tutor them free of charge. Her only wish was to see them complete high school and move on to the university. These were all children who had either dropped out after

grade 5 or were bound to, had she not intervened. Now every single one of them is still in school, some preparing for their matriculation examinations in the spring of 2022.

Dhelan was just fourteen when a CWSA team of field workers came to the village and after meetings with the community set up a theatre group. Her family joined and after the training sessions, their first play focussed on the problems of underage marriages of young women. Having faced similar pressure, this was impetus enough for her to join the group for, as she says, 'If I could drive the message across and save the life of even one girl, my life would be worth it. I know the pressure because I was almost married early, but my parents had better sense and they stopped short at engagement, permitting me to continue my studies.'

While her own immediate family had no objection, others from the village with her uncle in the lead, thought it an evil deed to engage in activity as shameless as public theatre. Meanwhile, amid all that noise, the group was preparing another play about the dashed hopes of a girl who wishes for higher education but who is forced into marriage even before she reaches the legal marriageable age of eighteen. Now, there were older women in the theatre group, but no one young enough to play the child's role.

The story so resonated with Dhelan because she believed everyone had the right to pursue their dreams. She, who had almost ended up being married at age fourteen, thought she must play the part. After her family's permission, she was taken on and she acted the part so perfectly putting her heart and soul into the performance to move the audience. Two years

on she knows she has swayed several meddling paternal uncles and unthinking fathers from wasting precious young lives. She can count at least twelve young women who are in high school instead of cooking for their husbands and minding their children.

Seeing Dhelan now in her role as an educated young leader, the uncle who had so opposed her education and whose own daughters were all wedded at very young ages has now enrolled his granddaughters in school. Dhelan recalls his contrition when he says that it was the hand of Bhagwan that prevented him destroying her life just as he had his own daughters' lives.

Dhelan's cousin Mohan Lal, also a member of the theatre group, recounts the early days of theatre. Upon seeing the first performance against underage marriage, Pundit Siddique Bhagat of the village fervidly objected to the breach of ancient custom that these 'misguided' people were committing. Three performances later, the man was on their side speaking against underage marriage and encouraging parents to let their daughters be educated.

From a tailor master to the village, Mohan has turned into a full-fledged playwright who prepares themes, storylines and writes all the dialogue. He says when he presented video

recordings of his group's performances to other organisations, they established their own theatre groups. Now he receives demands to write plays on health, education and women's rights and this means some extra spending money. But more than the earning, it is the profound sense of achievement he gets from seeing how his work is dismantling an ancient iniquity.

Though the change has not come over the entire community one hundred percent, most are with these young theatre activists. There is now rarely any attempt to wed off an underage girl. Also, while all marriages are now recorded by a registered pundit, school enrolment has increased for which Dhelan can be credited to be the role model. The cousins say they have stopped two underage marriages and where they failed in the face of an obdurate father, the fourteen year-old girl suffered complicated childbirth that cost the family over a quarter million rupees in medical bills. The father is now reportedly repentant and as they say, better late than never.

Mohan himself married when he was not yet eighteen and his bride under fifteen years of age. That was before the CWSA programme reached his village, he says. But now he plans as many years of education as his own daughter would want.

For CWSA, the process of setting up the theatre groups was not easy. They had targeted twenty-two villages for three theatre groups. Not one community among them was ready: the activity was taboo. Kunhar Bheel was the first village where they formed the first Steering Committee and Community Group that led to the creation of the theatre group led by Mohan Lal. He says in the beginning, no one was willing to hear him out, but he never gave up. Out of the one thousand

households in his village and its immediate vicinity, he now has the support of more than two hundred and the following is growing.

This is just the beginning. But a as they say, a good beginning is a job well done.

LIFE CHANGES IN KHAMISO BHEEL

Village Khamiso Bheel lies a mere four kilometres outside Dhoro Naro town, but it is thousands of miles from the rest of Pakistan. The curse of the so-called 'Scheduled Castes' still stalks the village and according to Bhamar Bheel, the community is discriminated against. He recounts teachers in the local school do not permit Hindu children to use chairs and desks. They are, instead, seated on the floor and sometimes even outside in the veranda.

Unsurprisingly, even after finishing primary school, they cannot write their names, much less read the Sindhi script. Bhamar's litany of complaints continues when he recounts the case of his paternal aunt who was sent from hospital to hospital as doctors at each institution told the family that the facility was not equipped to handle her case. She was eventually treated at the private Rubi Dharamdas Hospital at Umerkot and the family came the poorer by Rs 10,000, a huge sum for poor landless peasants.

Late in 2020, a CWSA team visited the village and held a meeting with the community. The words, Community Group, Steering Committee and basic rights held no meaning with the people, but the men at once balked at the idea that their

women would be required to attend meetings and trainings with other men. It was good fortune that Bhamar, himself a college graduate, was at hand to grasp the meaning of what could be if the community was mobilised. He and his elderly aunt, Khatoon, invited the men that they could sit in with the group during the sessions.

'The first thing we learnt was the importance of unity and strength in numbers,' says Bhamar. He now recognised the disadvantage arising from disunity between his community and the Kohlis of the neighbouring para, both belonging to the same group that is discriminated against. They only had a shared religion, other than that they never sat down together to discuss and attempt to address the two basic problems

that bedevilled both communities: lack of education for their children and health facilities.

Bhamar says some parents had made feeble attempts to speak with the teachers about seating their children in the classroom instead of the verandas. The teachers responded in lukewarm manner and the parents came away unsatisfied. They did not know who to turn to next. The office of the District Education Department at Umerkot did not exist in their vocabulary.
With unremitting passion and persistence, Bhamar and Khatoon prevailed against a timeless bias. Within the space of four meetings with them, the Kohlis were on the same side as the Bheels. In November 2021, just months after the trainings ended, the two communities have a thirty-member steering committee and four Community Groups with ten members each. This means that the hundred and twenty households of the Bheel community and somewhat more of the Kohlis are all covered by these four groups.

The foremost focus of the Community Groups is to get out-of-school children inside the classrooms and then to ensure that they remain there with the rest of the students and not in the veranda. If community groups presented their problems, to the district group and together some twenty of them visited the District Education Officer. No one in the community had foreseen the magic this concerted effort would make. The school today stands transformed where Hindu and Muslim pupils sit side by side.

Bhamar says even he as a college graduate had never read Jinnah's speech of 11 August 1947 enjoining upon Pakistanis that as citizens of one nation they were all equal with the same rights

and can go to their places of worship in full freedom. Now as a group, the two communities demand medical facilities as provided to all others at government hospitals. If they feel their village is being left out of any ongoing vaccination drive, they meet the District Health Officer with their demand.

'We do not go as a mob but as a group of civilised people. We have learned to write our applications and if we are not heard, we protest. But we do not create a disturbance or hinder passing traffic. Fighting serves no purpose. If it did, Kashmir would have long ago been liberated,' Bhamar says with a laugh. He adds that the CWSA training has taught the community that infrastructure, which they thought they were never destined to enjoy, can easily be theirs if they see the chairman or secretary of their union council. They did all these exercises earlier as well, but they never worked because anyone with an issue went as an individual who could easily be ignored.

This is how it works in Bhamar's own words: in October 2021, he approached the union council office to procure birth certificates for a group of children and was informed by the clerk that the chairman was not available. He waited the entire morning, but the man did not turn up. He returned the next day and the same occurred. On the third day, Bhamar gathered the members of the Steering Committee and the group visited the union council. Within an hour, the chairman made an appearance and the needful was done.

Most essentially, the trainings have made the community aware of their basic rights as citizens of Pakistan. Bhamar quotes Article 25 of the Constitution of 1973 that assures all citizens of equal right. No, says he. Before he underwent the training,

he was not aware of what the Constitution said, and this despite his own college education!

There are villages like Gambay jo Daro where a retrogressive landlord prevented CWSA from working even after initial meetings and formation of the Steering Committee. Not that the Khamiso Bheel landlord was not concerned about the comings and goings. He asked Bhamar what all the activity meant. 'I told him he need not be worried and that it is all for our betterment,' he says. That ended the matter there.

One thing at a time seems to be the guiding principle of the Khamiso Bheel community. And the first on the agenda is education for their children. Once that begins well, they will be equipped to campaign for the rest of their rights that the Constitution of Pakistan promises them.

HANIFA'S TALE

Hanifa, is a member of the Khamiso Bheel Community Group for which she earns a monthly honorarium of Rs 4000. Now barely into her thirties, she has learnt some essential lessons of life after she underwent the trainings and vowed never to let her daughters suffer as she suffered.

Barely fifteen when married, she had an unhappy union with a farm labourer. One after the other, she bore her unloving husband four daughters before she learned that the philanderer was having an affair with another woman in a neighbouring village. She says she told her man he was destroying not just her life, but that of his four daughters as well. Rather than heed to wisdom and abandon his illicit relationship, the man turned violent towards Hanifa. She had just delivered her fourth and last daughter when she found her husband missing. That was in 2016 and the man never returned home. If that cut her deep, the greater hurt was from people around her who blamed her for her husband's waywardness. It was all her fault that she failed to keep her man, she was taunted.

As the only daughter of her parents and the sister to four brothers, Hanifa had been pampered and had never done any farm work. With the only earning hand out of her life, she

was hard put to provide for her four daughters. Willy-nilly she turned to farm labour and became independent for she could not depend on her brothers who had families of their own.

She cannot pronounce CWSA calling it simply idaro (organisation) and says that she reached a mental watershed when the idaro performed an interactive play on Hindu Marriage Laws. She realised she was not the only one who had no idea that the government had promulgated such a legislation. Even less had she known that her estranged husband was bound to provide for the children. But in the absence of a marriage certificate, she did not have any proof of being the absconder's wife and therefore neither that of her daughters' paternity.

If ever Hanifa had felt helpless in her life, it was now. If only she had her daughters' birth certificates, she could have gone to court for their rights. But there arose in her mind an unflinching resolve to never let her misfortune be visited upon her daughters. 'I suffered because my parents were ignorant, but I will not let my daughters suffer the same fate. When they wed, their unions will be duly registered and so will be the births of their children,' says Hanifa.

Meanwhile, she is striving to educate the girls. As of November 2021, only one of the girls is enrolled in the local school. The others will follow suit.

Now, if having learned a few lessons, Hanifa is a changed woman, it is her mother Khatoon who is the one to be emulated. In 2015, her farm labourer husband lost the use of both legs and with that his only source of income. Khatoon began to

work in his stead, even driving his donkey cart and taking her husband where he wanted to go. It was she who confronted her former son in law when he made an appearance threatening to forcibly take away his daughters. Khatoon had a case registered against him, got him arrested and jailed for a month. That was time enough to cool his spirit.

Khatoon wields a smartphone, waves it in the air and says it contains the telephone numbers of all government officials from the deputy commissioner and the district police officer down to the lowest clerk in every office. 'If ever there is an issue, I don't hesitate to call them. And when I visit their offices, I demand to be sat on a chair! I leave only when I get what I have gone for.'

Those who know her say Khatoon was always a plucky woman. It was the training that honed and focused it.

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SPREADING THE LIGHT

Chatro Bheel of village Sadhori presides over Roshni (Light or Brightness), the village organisation of which he is the president. 'Before CWSA there was no roshni in our village,' he says using the symbolic title to proper advantage. It was only in March 2021 that the light shone on the poor Bheel people Sadhori.

He says the Bheel community is so poor and so dispossessed that they hold everyone apparently better off than themselves in awe. To illustrate his point, Chatro recounts how he took his cousin suffering from an eye ailment to the eye hospital in the city . He went in, paid the dues and got a slip of paper from the clerk. But the presence of the doctor, a woman, dressed in fine clothes and nicely made up was overpowering for a poor Bheel, he says.

'She did not respond to me; it was as if I did not exist and I did not have the courage to address her. Shortly after, she left in her car and I stood their thinking she did not even care to look at us because in this class-ridden society we illiterate people in our poor clothes are not worthy of her attention,' laments Chatro. That was in August 2021, three months before he got his two-

day training with CWSA. But now things are changed. The training has taught him that he is neither a lesser human being nor a lesser citizen of Pakistan and that he has the same rights as anyone else in the country.

Years of being dispossessed have filled his soul with lamentations and he tells of how his community stopped sending their daughters to school. To begin with his village of two hundred households does not have a school. While boys who finish primary education from a neighbouring village, continue in the school in Umerkot city, girls are another story. When they sent their daughters to be educated, it was customary for the Muslim teachers to pluck girls of the minority community from class and send them home to serve as domestic workers during school hours.

Chatro says he tried complaining but neither the teacher nor the principal entertained him. Since this kind of treatment for their daughters was a common complaint and because there was no recourse, the community collectively withdrew their daughters from school. That was fifteen years ago, says Chatro. Neither he nor other suffering parents knew there was a District Education Officer they could complain to and therefore nothing changed in all these years.

Now, in the post-training era of Roshni, they have a newly established Steering Committee in the village and a number of Community Groups each with a woman and a man. Each group will work on ten households to pass on the training to them and educate them on issues such as early marriages, school enrolment for girls, gender equality and health. For Chatro, the foremost for the time being are education and health.

He says that he now has the confidence that he lacked even three months before when the eye doctor did not care to look at him. Now he can demand attention in a government office; now he will fight for the education of the girl child from his village. Time was when he and others like him thought there was no point in educating their children for a poor sharecropper's child could only grow up to be a sharecropper and a cobbler's child a cobbler. They felt that even education could not better their lot. But now they have become aware that their children too can have a different future with education.

'I now know how and where to demand my right. I can now ask where the concerned office is and visit the sahib without being overawed,' says Chatro. He sees the strength that the newly established National Lobbying Delegation[3] gives him to make his voice heard at the district level and even higher. He sees hope that the closed and disused dispensaries, the absence of schools in villages such as his own Sadhori and so many other issues can finally be resolved.

To begin with, Chatro has started a school for girls where one did not exist. Every evening, girls of various ages from his village gather in his home where a group of educated boys tutor them.

3 *The National Lobbying Delegation (NLD) is a platform of 20 members, established by CWSA, working together to improve democratization and governance to secure democratic rights of Non-Muslims in Pakistan. The delegation comprises of volunteers from Civil Society Organizations, rights activists, journalists, lawyers and educationists. The majority representation in this group is from Christian, Hindu and Sikh Communities of Pakistan.*

When these girls are finally able to join a school, many of them will go directly to grade two or perhaps even three. Thereafter, for them the sky will be the limit.

Sumri of the same village joined the village organisation in March 2021. She is new and has undergone only one training session. Already she can claim that her door-to-door campaign got fifty out-of-school boys inside the classroom because, as she says, she could only pass on sense when she got some in her own head. And this sense was the result of the CWSA training. 'I have spent some rupees getting to Umerkot for the training, and if I now don't return to my village to pass on what I've learnt, I am wasting my money and all this effort,' says Sumri.

She says though there had been NGO intervention in her village in the past, it was always a men-only affair. Women never attended and so they never had a voice. But the missing voice has now been found. When asked if she can now face up to the local landlord and speak with him, she says she can and she will. But will she be rude and forward with him? No, she says, she has found a voice, not lost her civility.

Never having been to school, the irrepressible Sumri has moved forward with just one training session. One wonders where this wonderful young woman would have been had she been through college.

AJIMAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

jimat of village Surto Oad joined the Every Voice Counts project in 2016 as a member of the Steering Committee. Over the next two years she and her colleagues in the committee, all duly trained by CWSA, became the anti-child marriage force in the village. Their door-to-door awareness raising campaign, she claims, resulted in the postponement of no fewer than one hundred and fifteen underage marriages. This was, first of all, by intervening and putting some sense in the heads of parents ignorant of the law and slaves to ancient barbaric custom.

There were parents who thought this action was meddling in the private affairs of families and were adamant that the wedding should take place as planned. Ajimat says she knew the police too had been trained under the programme and that the committee could report any breach of the 2016 law against child marriage. In the first two years, the Steering Committee of Surto Oad registered seven cases against law breaking parents who refused to listen to reason.

By her own admission, her finest moment was when she heard of Jethanand of her village who, ignorant of the anti-child marriage law, was wedding off his fifteen year-old daughter.

The child wanted to continue school, but she was powerless against the wish of her father. When word reached Ajimat of this infraction, Ajimat got together a team of six members, three women and three men, of the Steering Committee to talk to the family. They convinced Jethanand to let the child continue her education and in accordance with the new law wait until she is at least eighteen years old. They also made him aware of the possibility of a jail term should he go ahead with his plan. The man relented and today the girl is in grade nine, in a school in the neighbouring village and hopes to continue into college.

When the Steering Committee and the Community Group were formed in Surto Oad, there were few girls who had gone beyond grade five in formal school education while those truly committed had attempted self-education. The door-to-door education crusade launched by Ajimat and her colleagues has sent nearly every girl child to school. In just five years of dedicated campaigning, they have managed to get five girls in a Hyderabad school.

Before the formation of the groups in the village, it was everyone for themselves. Nobody considered a problem, even as glaring as lack of education, as a collective one. It was always the other person's headache. But today, says Ajimat, the Surto Oad community is like a monolith. It is one for all and all for one.

Asked how her being part of the Community Group changed her own life, Ajimat says she is now more independent than before. Time was when she could not even go to the local bazaar by herself or in a group with other women. Now she has

been as far as Hyderabad and even Karachi. Earlier, the women of the village wore the garments their husbands shopped for them. Now she and other women go to the bazaar and make their own selections. The best thing given to them by the CWSA training is this independence.

IN THE WATCH OF THE WATCHMAN

Sheva Ram of village Surto Oad is the president of the Steering Committee that he and his colleagues have named Pirani Taraqiati Tanzeem[4]. His association with CWSA began in 2015 and since then he, with only primary school education, feels more accomplished than ever before. For a living he works as the watchman in his own alma mater that was established in the village back in 1992. But even after almost two decades of operation it had four girl students and some fifteen boys cramped together in a single-room building with two teachers. For want of space, classes were held in the narrow veranda or out in the open.

The toilets were broken and there was no drinking water for the students. Unsurprisingly, in the middle of the school day, a child in need of a washroom or a drink would inevitably not return until the next morning.

The school now has four rooms, two of them added since Sheva Ram's interaction with CWSA began. There are now one hundred and fifty girl students and two hundred and fifty boys. There are working toilets and a reverse osmosis apparatus for clean drinking water. The school, says Sheva Ram, is now enclosed in a six-hundred-foot (183 metre) boundary wall. It

4 *Pirani Development Organisation – translated to english*

all happened because he has learned how to talk to government officers and politicians, he says.

'Neither I nor anyone else in the village knew where we could go with our problems. And even if we did, we were so afraid of anyone above our station that we could not speak with government officers,' says Sheva Ram. After the District Engagement Group[5] was set up and he became a vocal part of the quarterly meetings with the deputy commissioner and other officials, Sheva Ram knew there was no difference between him in his poor clothes and they in their nicely pressed outfits.

Within the year of the first visit by CWSA field staff, Sheva Ram was going on his own to pester the District Education Officer about upgradation of the school. Before the year 2016 was out, the building was enlarged. Then came the boundary wall and after that the toilets were repaired by the government. CWSA provided the reverse osmosis plant. All the school lacks now, says Sheva Ram, are at least two women teachers. Even so, when the Secretary Sindh assembly visited the district, the education officer brought him to what he considered a model. Not the one to lose a chance, Sheva Ram petitioned for the institution to be upgraded to higher secondary level.

'That has been sanctioned. We are going to have a new block in the school. There will be more teachers, even women teachers, and this will be the most going educational concern in a village of this size,' Sheva Ram says, almost breathless with excitement. If he could not go past the fifth grade of education, he is going to make sure that the children of his village lack no opportunity to be educated.

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5 *Set up through CWSA interventions as part of their projects.*

When the school is upgraded, children from neighbouring villages will be enrolling there and they would have to trudge to the school some three hundred metres across the sand from the road passing outside the village. For Sheva Ram, the deputy commissioner was a familiar figure so off he went to see the man. Orders went out for the chief engineer in the district to survey the requirement. The road was approved and the matter eventually came to rest with the local Member Provincial Assembly for release funds for the one thousand foot-long (309 metres) tarmac road.

Sheva Ram says he saw the politician who attempted the hedging usual with politicians. But our man was having nothing of that. An argument ensued in which Sheva Ram had to be told that his family had been landless workers on the lands of the politician and he now had the audacity to question the big man. Sheva Ram stood his ground and said that the funds the politician held were meant to be utilised for just such projects as the road he demanded. He only left with permission for the release of funds.

Now when the upgraded school attracts students from nearby villages, they will have transport bring them right to the gates

of the institution. Where even teachers seldom take interest, Sheva Ram is the only watchman anywhere who has done so much for his school.

His proudest moment, however, was back in 2015 when he first became president of the village Steering Committee. Word came to him of the wedding of a twelve-year-old girl with a boy three years her senior. Together with some other members of the committee, Sheva Ram went over to tell the parents of the grave crime they were committing. For the parents, however, this was a private affair and they told the visitors to keep out of it. Sheva Ram and his colleagues attempted to recruit the help of some other notables of the village, but no one came forward.

The only recourse now was the police. The matter was reported, the police arrived and the ceremony was disrupted. That was back in 2015. Today, the young couple having crossed the legal age of marriage are happily wedded.

That was just the beginning. It gave Sheva Ram the incentive and the drive to continue on this journey of enlightenment.

A LITTLE TRAINING, A LITTLE HELP TO CHANGE LIFES

Narsingh, about eighty years old, but completely worn out by the hard desert life calls the village of Sheedi jo Tar, 10 kilometres due east of Nabisar town, his home. He remembers the good days when rains fell as they had always fallen and that was in July. In anticipation, his family and others of the village would have sowed their guar[6] beans, millets and mung[7] seeds a fortnight earlier. They saw them sprout from the rain drenched sand and grow to sway in the desert wind. In those days, an acre rendered as much as 1600 kilograms of guar and about a 800 kg of millets, says Narsingh with a sigh. He raises his eyes heavenward as if silently petitioning God to bring back those days.

Of course, Thari people could just not get the 'chhapano' (fifty-six) drought out of their collective memory. Taking its name from 1956 of the Vikrami era and coinciding with 1898 that British documents on Thar record vividly, no living soul has witnessed it; they have only heard of it from the elders. But the memory refuses to fade and they pray that may nature never revisit them that way again.

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6 *Cluster beans*
7 *Legumes*

In the 1990s, things began to go bad when droughts became period. There were years when no rain fell at all and there were other years when they came late in September or even October. For desert farmers late rains were the same as no rain at all because sowing more than eight weeks earlier meant very

little sprouting. The routine for such years was for families to migrate to what they know as 'barrage area', that is, canal-irrigated districts west of the desert.

In his thirties, Jethamal has only heard of the good times. For him life has always been a hard struggle. He has only known erratic rainfall, a far cry from the regular and timely ones that the elders speak of. In his time, he has never harvested more than 400 kilograms of millets from an acre. If Narsingh's generation was able to keep enough of the harvest for the family, there was yet plenty left to sell in the grain and vegetable market of Nabisar. The notion that farmers would have enough to sell for cash is an alien thought. Nowadays, says Jethamal, because of erratic rains, the farmers of Sheedi jo Tar never have enough to last them any more than two or three months.

To the question how they keep body and soul together, Jethamal says they leave home in April to go live on irrigated farms where they harvest wheat for the big landlords. Four acres of ready wheat can be cut, cleaned, winnowed and packed in sacks by two men in twenty days. Payment being in kind for this sort of work, they get 320 kilograms of wheat. Divided between the two partners, they bring it home where it lasts their families just two months. Meagre it might be, but since it comes shortly before the millets and guar sowing season, it is a boon for poor farmers who can devote their time to the ploughing and sowing.

'The year 2019 was good with timely and sufficient rains,' recalls Jethomal. The crops were coming along nicely when the locust attack occurred and, he says, there was not enough ground to walk without crushing dozens of them with every

step. That was a very hard year and seeing cash would be needed for food, they resorted to selling firewood in Nabisar. Thankfully there is the invasive mesquite that sells for about Rs 80[8] per 40 kilograms. And there is also the more prized Acacia senegal that fetches Rs 120 for the same weight. Of this latter, says Jethamal, they only remove dead branches because it is known to all that it grows slow and provides good fodder to their livestock.

Collecting firewood is hard work, however. A donkey-cartload of 160 kilograms takes three to four days to collect and the ride into town takes two hours where the average earning from that load is about Rs 400[9] while the trip takes a full day out and back. That is, five days of hard labour fetched under Rs 100 per day. 'When things are as bad as they can get here, even this is a blessing,' says Jethamal.

Rains fell on time and the harvest was reasonable in 2020. But in 2021, the month of Savan (mid-July to mid-August) went dry. The deluge came after mid-September when it was too late for the seed resting under the parched sand since nearly three months earlier to sprout. Consequently, even the cost of seed was not redeemed for the farmers of Sheedi jo Tar. With work for cash in the cotton fields still a month away, things looked bleak.

On the first day of September, a team of CWSA field workers came to the village with food aid packages. Eighty kilograms of wheat flour, ten of pulses, fifteen of rice, five of sugar with seven litres of cooking oil were like godsend. This was enough to last just over a month, but as Jethamal notes, for them it meant

8 *Equivalent to USD 0.4 per 40 kgs*
9 *USD 2.2*

two months' worth of aid: one month's worth in food and one month in what they saved from purchasing food in September. 'Diwali (Festival of Lights) was drawing up in November and this little saving helped us put food at home for the festival. And when there is food, our Diwali is a happy one.'

As the winter drags on, the men of Sheedi jo Tar have gone back to carting firewood to Nabisar. It is hard work, admits Jethamal. But at least they can return with a barrel full of potable water from the water supply in town. With their village having only brackish wells, it has been old practice for visitors going to town bringing back whatever water they can carry. Jethamal says the community periodically also pools resources to purchase a five thousand-litre tanker for Rs 4000[10] and dump it in the communal underground concrete tanks.

Used judiciously, the supply lasts fifteen days for five families and when there is no more money, they can always fall back on taking firewood to town and coming home with a barrel or two of water for which they pay nothing.

Everything said and done, all difficulties notwithstanding, Sheedi jo Tar is still home to these one hundred families of mostly Bheel and some Kohli families. Their ancestors have lived here for a few hundred years and they will too. The look forward to the next sowing season with hope in their hearts. Then the farmers will again plough the sand and scatter the seeds. Perhaps Bhagwan will be kind next year. If not, some men will go to work in the cities. Others can rely on the mesquite to provide fuelwood to sell. Meagre the proceeds from that may be, but there will pay for their food.

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10 USD 22

As for leaving Sheedi jo Tar is concerned, that thought never crosses the minds of these hardy people whose ancestors have lived here since the time the lost river of Sindh watered their land.

Not very far south, fifty-two year-old Punoo Bheel is the big man in his village which carries his name. And that is all, for as his son Valmesh says what good is a name when you know only adversity. Punoo remembers the better times when his twenty acres of land would fetch enough harvest of guar, mong and millets to not just see his family through much of the year but also some to sell for cash. The century did not dawn well for Thar, says old Punoo. Summer rains began to fail repeatedly.

'We sow in June and if rains are any later than late July, it means our seed is wasted. For us it is drought,' says Valmesh. He adds wryly that 2018 was a year of somewhat good rains and a reasonable harvest. The following year everything was looking good, but the locust attack came and all was destroyed. Families went under debt just to keep body and soul together. And if anything, this system of lending is another form of bonded labour: the money-lender lends on the condition that he will accept repayment only kind, that is, the crop. Therefore, while guar sells for Rs 3000 per 40 kilograms in the market, the money-lender takes the same weight off the debtor for only Rs 2000.

Unsurprisingly, in the adverse conditions faced by the farmers of Punoo Bheel, every single of the three hundred households are under debt. Punoo himself owes the money-lender Rs 100,000[11]. To the question how that will be repaid in the face of shifting monsoon patterns and crop failure because

11 USD 550

of climate change he says they only have God to rely on. 'If one year He gives us timely and ample rain, we will be able to repay our debt and even make some money to see us through the following two years.' In Thar Punoo's 'if' is a huge one, however.

The CWSA food aid package was a blessing. 'For families as desperate as us where we have barely one day's ration of wheat flour, it was like a festival with 80 kilograms of it besides other items,' says Valmesh. 'We were able to engage in our firewood collection with peace of mind.' As well as that, because not having to purchase food meant some money and they were able to light up their homes for the Diwali festival in November.

Besides the food aid, the community was also provided with vegetable seeds and shown how to plant small plots. In November their spinach was about ready and according to Valmesh everyone was looking forward to having proper food instead of the wheaten chapatti and the paste of ground red chilies.

The people of Punoo Bheel do not know what Providence has in store for them for the coming years. But many able-bodied men have already moved to Hyderabad and Karachi to labour in the factories or on construction sites. There they will remain until word reaches them in June 2022 that the monsoon seems ready to burst on their parched land. If that occurs, they will return home to hoe their fields, plant the seed and wait for the harvest to ripen.

They do not want to bring the 'if not' phrase into their minds. That thought is too dreadful. The one silver lining for them is the vegetable seed they get from their little kitchen

gardens. Using that seed, they can at least hope to grow enough vegetables to keep their families fed.

And then there are those whose clouds are grey and dull without the proverbial silver lining.

Five kilometres southeast of Nabisar, in a nondescript village with the poetic name Meenh Vasayo – Let it Rain – Rani who seems to be in her mid-eighties and her daughter in law Jeni some twenty years her junior have known nothing but adversity for many years.

Rani bore her husband four daughters and a son in quick succession and when she was barely twenty-five, her husband passed away leaving her to tend for five small children. The children and their widowed mother worked as farm labourers moving between their home and nearby lands to pick cotton or chillies or help in the harvesting of whatever was in season.

When Jeni came to the house as the wife of Rani's son Sodho, they worked harder still because Sodho's four sisters were already in their teens and considered of marriageable age, a proposition hard to meet with so few resources to hand. Very hard work and endless scraping raised small amounts and one by one the girls were sent off to their husbands. While their families grew, Jeni and Sodho were unable to have children. And then about the year 2005, Sodho's asthma worsened and he hit the bed.

For fully eight years, the man lay on the sick bed while Jeni and her mother in law made rallis on order to meet his medical bills and to provide whatever meagre food they could. Had they

possessed the capital to invest in material, their profit would have been considerably higher. But in the absence of that, they were fortunate to have their clients supply all the ralli[12] materials to them and pay them for their labour. In 2013, the long-suffering Sodho passed away from this life.

Time passed and the poring over the needlework took its toll on old Rani's eyes as they slowly began to give. The struggle was now solely upon Jeni and since it took a fortnight to complete a ralli, each complete piece fetching Rs 500, the business was hardly anything to help the bereft duo pull through the month. They barely managed to pay for basic food items while relatives helped them from time to time. Jeni observes that the world is full of good people and even though they have gone under a debt of Rs 4000 at the local store, the store keeper knowing their situation has never pestered them.

12 **Ralli** *quilts are traditional quilts with appliqué and patchwork handmade by women artisans of Sindh›s remote areas.*

If there was anyone deserving of the CWSA food aid package, it was these two women chosen by Providence to lead a life of adversity. With a cackle of laughter, Jeni says the food lasted the two of them nearly two months in which time they did not go under additional debt nor did they have to bother their relatives for help. The earning from her ralli work brought in some money to arrange provisions for the next month. In effect, the food grant lasted the two of them a full three months. And now it is back to relying on the ralli making.

The future holds no promise for Rani and Jeni but Jeni is yet hopeful for the rest of the world for she prays for her visitors to have 'so many children that they people a whole village'.

DAI: CARETAKER OF THE RO PLANT

Comprising of one hundred and twenty Bheel households, Nau Subhani lies some thirty kilometres east of Umerkot town. Until 2019 when CWSA field workers visited it, the village had remained neglected. Other than a few underground rainwater harvesting tanks built several years ago by another organisation, it had nothing to show in terms of modernity. The village has a school all right; but there is no teacher and the building stands abandoned.

Without education, Dai is yet a very vocal person and that might be why she is a member of the Village Committee. She narrates the community's water woes: the village has a tarai (natural depression) that fills during the rains and if the monsoon is good, the water usually lasts about two months. When that runs dry, they turn to their underground tanks. But then rains are rare in Thar and this water did not last very long. The only well in the village renders brackish water that is good for livestock and washing.

Their source of potable water, if it may be called that, was the army's Water Point 3 about eight kilometres away by the roadside. This water carried tiny squiggly critters and it had to be put in either a plastic bottle or a cooking utensil and left in

the hot sun for the worms to be killed. Yet, says Dai, the water gave them gastric problems.

Even so, procurement of water at WP 3 was not without trouble. Like everyone else Dai's family also used as their water receptacle a discarded pneumatic inner tube of a truck that was carted to the water point by donkey. She had three of her eight children assigned to the task of going out at seven in the morning to fill up. It was because of this daily drudge that she had only two children attending the private school in a neighbouring village. The water carriers returned about noon because of the long wait with a large crowd of similarly thirsty villagers and livestock. Sometimes these crowds would be so large that Dai's children would be gone the entire day. Winters were a bit easier when one trip suffice; in summer however, the children had to make a second trip in the afternoon. And because the water came loaded with its ration of squiggly beings, it had to be treated in the sun before consumption.

The other source of potable water was the water tanker the community purchased from Umerkot. At Rs 7000 per tanker, this was no mean investment that lasted about twenty days in the crumbling underground tanks. Groups of three to four households would pool the money for the tanker to ease the trips to the water point, especially during the long, searing summer months. It is hard to imagine how a community living well below the poverty line could make such recurring expenditure, but then that was the cost of keeping body and soul together.

After the necessary training in, among other things, kitchen gardening in 2020, CWSA provided the village with fourteen


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underground concrete tanks to harvest rain water and in 2021 installed a reverse osmosis plant to deliver 5000 litres over twenty-four hours. Of a sudden, the long treks and the longer wait at WP 3 were over. Dai immediately enrolled her three children on water duty in the same school that their two siblings were already attending. With the large expense on purchased water over, she is happy to pay the school an additional sum of Rs 200 per child per month. That is something she could not have imagined without the RO plant.

With the underground tanks filled by rain, the training on kitchen gardening came in very handy, says Dai. Tiny plots measuring hardly bigger than two metres square, hedged in by thorn twigs to keep out the goats, dot the entire village. In August like everyone else Dai planted the aubergine, zucchini and okra seeds donated by CWSA. She says she harvested her first crop and her family dined on the best vegetables in a very long time.

Before the rainwater harvesting tanks and the training in kitchen gardening, they had to take the nearly two hour ride to Umerkot to purchase vegetables. That meant an expense of Rs 200 for the out and back fare for purchases worth Rs 500 that lasted the average family at most four days. And then, even at the time of purchase the vegetables were stale. Now it is all freshly plucked and wholesome, says Dai. With the first vegetable harvest over with, she was preparing to plant the next batch of spinach, rapeseed and marrow. Thinking ahead, she is saving seeds from harvest to use again.

If the water in the underground tank runs out, the community will not overuse the RO plant, says Dai. For their kitchen

gardening they will still get the worm-ridden water from WP 3 or from their brackish well. In order to prevent overuse of the RO plant, the community has resolved that large families take two thirty-litre barrels in a day while smaller families half as much.

The plant being a machine, the users know it will need periodic repair. For that each household saves Rs 100 every month. Initially the community made the monthly collection held in a community pool. Later it was resolved that every household keep the compulsory saving at home and whenever a repair needs be done, the cost be evenly divided among all users.

The question to Dai was what was everyone doing with the substantial saving made possible by the installation of the RO plant. For one, more children were in school since March 2021 immediately after the plant became functional. Secondly, because of the ready cash now available to every family, they buy dry food items from town in bulk, cutting down the cost of frequent trips.

Asked to name the biggest advantage of the RO plant, Dai did not have to think hard to name two. One, children's' education and the second is being cured of the gastric problems that regularly took them to the doctor in Umerkot.

If Nau Subhani has Dai, not far away in Dediyo Mangrio it is Mariam. Clearly, she is by far Sabir's better half and not just as a commonly used figure of speech. While he is inexpressive and stumbles to explain what he means, she is energetic, vocal and very clear in her mind. She cuts her husband in mid-sentence to say that as the one who runs the home, she knows how the CWSA intervention has changed life in their village.

For starters, as a user of the fuel efficient cooking stove introduced by the organisation, she has much to say. The earlier traditional stove used up to five kilograms of fuelwood to cook one meal for the family. With two meals every day, the usual consumption was ten kilograms of fuel. She points out that fuelwood is not just lying around in the desert.

Since it is the man's job to collect fuelwood, Sabir elaborates how hard it was gathering dry timber from the surrounding area. Since they prefer not to cut green trees and rely on dead wood, mostly ak (Calotropis gigantea), it takes up to three days to gather the 40 kilograms for one donkey cartload. This weight of fuelwood would be burnt up in three to four days. That is, like every other man he was endlessly on his collection rounds. But with the new fuel efficient stoves that can take two pots at a time, the same amount of cooking consumes somewhat less than half that amount of fuel. That makes Sabir a very happy man for he now has ample time to attend to his livestock.

Mariam is more concerned with the fact that the chimney on the new stove discharges the smoke straight out into the open and she does not have to contend with burning eyes and the persistent cough she once had from inhaling smoke. Since respiratory problems were recurrent, she had frequent visits to the doctor at Umerkot which took up the better part of the day. The expense on bus fare and doctor's fees rounding up to more than Rs 1000 per trip was the more weighty problem.

Then there was the case of the blackened cooking utensils and the large amount of water needed for washing up. Since there is no piped water in the village, she had to fill up at the brackish

well about a quarter of a kilometre from her home and tote the laden pots home. She cuts off Sabir again to say that the fuel efficient stove does not blacken her utensils and saves her time. Mariam now devotes the extra time on her needlework and is making some money from selling her colourful rallis.

Clearly at a loss for words, Sabir is quiet when Mariam prods him, 'Tell the man about your Disaster Risk Reduction training with CWSA and that you are a member of the DRR committee.' The man fumbles and it is Mariam who speaks on his behalf. Time was when they never ready for drought even when they knew it was impending. They began to prepare when the calamity was upon them. The training taught them the imperative of collecting and storing fodder for the lean period. This was something they had never done before.

And then there was the matter of de-stocking of livestock that had not been practiced before. Sabir says that in severe cases of drought, they would see their livestock perish right in front of their eyes and be unable to do anything. The dying of the animals was the will of God against which humans were powerless, he adds darkly. But now they have been taught to sell their livestock if adversity is imminent. 'We learned in the training to not squander the proceeds of the sales but to keep the money safe until we were ready to restock,' he says.

The advance fodder collection means that even if drought is upon them and the family has to migrate to irrigated areas in the west, the whole clan and livestock need not move. Now a couple of able-bodied men from the extended family stay behind to care for and feed the animals. Moving with entire herds and watching them perish on the way was cumbersome

and very slow. Without that impediment, the migrating family members can take the bus and be within hours of home instead of the days it once took.

Mariam again takes over and relates how the DRR training made them aware of their right over the Livestock Department and that they can demand for their animals to be vaccinated. Again this is a first for village Dediyo Mangrio. The loss of livestock may have been the will of God, but He has now given them the sense to seek help from the Livestock Department. Countless animals have been preserved in the one year since the training. Sabir adds that they have the telephone numbers of the Livestock Department, the Fire Brigade and other agencies that they never knew existed to serve them.

Mariam prods her man to speak about the reverse osmosis plant newly installed in the village. But before he can begin, she says the RO plant brought about an increase in school enrolment for. The water tanker from Umerkot cost them a hefty Rs 10,000 which lasted four to five households about a fortnight. Delivered of that expense, the community is spending the saving on education.

Though there were so many things one could wish for, Mariam believes it is her children's education that will eventually change their lives.

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A CASE OF TWO HOSPITALS

Pithoro and Samaro talukas (tehsils or subdivisions of district Umerkot) lie west of Umerkot city closer to the canal irrigated part of the district. The population here is therefore relatively better off than their less fortunate siblings of the desert. And that 'relative' affluence is but a shadow better than the abject poverty of the deep desert where water is bitter, where crops fail or sprout depending upon fickle rain and where they trek two hours or more to fill their pitchers with potable water. There schools are few and health facilities non-existent as a consequence of which locals were forced to seek private facilities. If these are not plain unaffordable, they put a significant strain on the shallow pockets of poor desert people.

When the Taluka Headquarter Hospitals in Pithoro and Samaro were established some forty years ago, they provided reasonable service to their areas comprising a collective population of some fifteen thousand people. There were resident doctors both men and women and supply of medicine was fair, though not always satisfactory. Then, as is the case with most government initiatives, ennui set in. The doctors began to absent themselves from duty, medicines supply faltered and sometimes completely stopped for weeks on end and the only

professional to rely on was a Lady Health Visitor (LHV) and a traditional birth attendant (TBA) or dai in local terms.

In 2019, CWSA initiated the Umerkot Health Project at the Taluka Headquarter Hospitals of Pithoro and Samaro. This was a time when health facilities were at the lowest in both facilities. The only staff the hospitals had was a TBA each; at Pithoro a male doctor was available part of the day while at the other, not even that. Patients were mostly attended to by the TBA and the dispenser, if the latter was on duty on a given day.

The story of how the situation changed after the CWSA intervention can best be told by those who have wrought the transformation and those who benefit from the renewed facility.

Staff Nurse Sheena at the Pithoro hospital graduated from Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences at Hyderabad. Having completed her four-year degree in nursing in 2015, she completed her internship at the same institution

before working in a couple of private health facilities. She gave up her assignment at Aga Khan Hospital, Karachi, to join the CWSA Umerkot Health Project. Her colleague at the Pithoro hospital, lady health worker (LHV) Kamla Bai, completed her two year training at Government Midwifery School, Umerkot in 2015 and worked a year at a local maternity hospital before joining the project. Sometime after their joining the facility, a lady doctor too became part of the team. The primary focus of the project was Mother and Child Health Care.

The timing could scarcely have been any better for within the year the Covid-19 pandemic broke out wreaking havoc on the socio-economic scene. As businesses slowed down and closed, thousands of local young men who worked the factories of Karachi and Hyderabad were laid off and returned home. Their income turned off, the men and their families resorted to the age-old sharecropping. But that could earn them barely enough to keep body and soul together. Expensive private healthcare facilities went beyond their reach because over the past decades the public had learnt not to rely on the two government facilities and were not ready to seek help with them. Obligated to pay for expensive private care, many families already subsisting below the poverty line went into debt.

In tandem with revamping the clinical facilities in the two towns, CWSA worked on awareness raising in target communities. This activity led to the establishment of Village Health Committees with five plus five women and men members; and Health Management Committees at taluka and district levels with ten of each gender. These committees are entrusted with passing the word around about available facilities. Besides, the monthly meetings do not just raise awareness about the

services offered by the project, they double as training sessions on health, hygiene and rights.

Sheena recounts: one morning early in 2021, there was some commotion at the entrance to the hospital. She went out to investigate and found a young woman in a swoon as she was unloaded from the rickshaw. With her was a new-born girl delivered in the seventh month. The delivery had taken place in the village under supervision of the TBA who had been unable to fully remove the placenta. If left inside, this can cause bleeding, infection and even death. The young mother was nearly at that final stage.

She was immediately operated upon, received a blood transfusion and today the mother and child are both healthy. If the facility had not existed, the TBA at Pithoro would have referred the patient to the civil hospital at Umerkot and the jolting hour-long ride thence. Even if the prematurely born baby had survived the ordeal, she would surely have been deprived of her mother.

Since people had stopped relying on government facilities, it was not known how many deaths would have occurred in outlying areas of the district. But with the health management committees in high gear, word was out and it was because of efforts by health committee members that this nameless mother was brought to the hospital in good time.

LHV Kamla Bai adds that it is only after the health committee's activation that the facilities offered by the hospital are now fully known in the villages. Over the past year, pregnant women have started coming in regularly for the four routine ante-natal check-ups. Earlier, such a check-up was sought only when a problem occurred and then too at a private facility that was invariably a strain on the poor pocket. Besides the doctor's fees at Umerkot, charge for an ultrasound test was Rs 500, setting the family back by almost Rs 1500. At the Taluka Headquarter Hospital the same test is now free of charge.

The ultrasound machine at this hospital has an interesting history. It was installed about the turn of the current century and was shut down in 2004. There was no fault in the machine, it was only absence of a qualified operator for it falling into disuse. Trained to operate the machine, Sheena's joining put the machine into running again after fully sixteen years of neglect.

That and the check-up routine has put the ante-natal health of mother and child at a marked advantage because now any complication is discovered in good time and attended to. If it cannot be handled by this facility, it is referred to the District Headquarter Hospital at Umerkot. Every delivery, asserts Kamla, is now followed by post-natal check-ups of mother and child.

'This is also the first time at this facility that the Mid Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) test for overall health and state of nutrition is being done,' says Kamla. Any grown woman measuring below 23 is referred to the nutritionist at People's Primary Healthcare Initiative (PPHI), Umerkot. Children and infants are also given the MUAC test and if necessary referred to the same facility. Kamla reiterates that the inflow of nearly eighty OPD visitors daily is only because of the work of the CWSA team and the health management committees to increase awareness at all levels in the district. She says there are days when the number of patients crosses one hundred.

Chheni, thirty-five years old and a resident of village Sabit Ali Shah has worked as a TBA for many years. She received her training from her mother who had done the same work all her life. But she admits she knew nothing about ante-natal check-ups. When the time came, she simply delivered the baby leaving mother and infant to their own devices. If by physical examination she felt there was some abnormality, she would take her patient to a private clinic at Umerkot for an ultrasound test and gynaecological advice. But mostly patients balked at the Rs 500 cost added to which was the out and back fare and the doctor's fees hiking up the per visit expense to nearly Rs 1500. For a person of means as limited as one from the desert, this meant simply to do without and leave everything to Providence. In 2020, Chheni underwent the CWSA training. Even to her, illiterate though she might be, the charts and diagrams were a great help. The theoretical training received from her mother paled in the face of the new knowledge and she learned much more than she knew even after years of hands-on experience. Best of all, she says is learning how essential is the need of the series of ante-natal tests at the hospital and how amiss she

was in never advising them until her training. She says she is now more trusted by the community because where earlier she catered only to her own village, she now regularly gets called for deliveries to neighbouring villages. If her work means an increment in earning, it also gives her a great deal of satisfaction because she now knows that she will not endanger an expecting mother's life. 'If I feel there is a complication, I immediately bring the patient to Sheena for an ultrasound test,' she says.

'Suffering people come to this hospital because they know the medication prescribed here is the best, way better than what they get at the government facility,' says Chheni. Asked how she knows the medicine here is better she is quick to retort, 'Because they all get well.' She maintains serious doubts regarding the supplies in government facilities, that is, if supplies are available.

Trainings are a regular feature of the Umerkot Health Project says Yaqoob Nohri of village Bhai Khan Nohri. The four-day training of the ten women and ten men of Taluka Health Management Committee was in progress in mid-November when took time out for a chat. This was not the first training session, however. He and other members of the committee had been through an earlier session in 2020 after which health care items such as soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste were distributed to the committee. 'Once children got used to the idea of hygiene, they pestered their parents to keep them supplied,' he says. In his view this is a huge leap forward from the time they thought a handful of dust rubbed on the hands and rinsed off was a good cleansing agent.

According to Yaqoob, as elsewhere in Pakistan, ordinary people

in Umerkot too resist vaccination. If it had taken several years to get polio recognised as a disease preventable by medication, Covid-19 and rubella vaccination are equally resisted. But the committee has acted proactively and now more and more villagers are demanding immunisation. As well as that, immunisation of new-born children had long been neglected is now sought after by parents. He believes this is because of the intensive awareness raising campaigns the Taluka Health Management Committee carried out.

'The greatest advantage from the CWSA training was the knowledge that we simple rural people too can demand our rights from government departments,' says Yaqoob. The outcome was that several communities got vaccinators from the Livestock Department to visit their villages to inoculate their animals.

Shanti, also undergoing the training with Yaqoob is a live wire. A resident of Mira Shah Goth, her national identity card records her age as thirty-nine, though she looks much younger. With only three grades of education, she has yet worked her way up to be a Community Health Worker and has worked with two different NGOs. In the aftermath of the 2011 floods, she worked as a community resource person for one of the organisations.

Being a member of the committee, she is very proactive going from door-to-door lecturing families on personal and domestic hygiene and no pregnant woman in her village misses her periodic ante-natal or post-natal tests. Nor too does an infant miss immunisation. She is a vocal advocate of small families even as she laughingly says she has six of her own

children, all born before she joined the CWSA programme. In the past year alone, she has encouraged twenty women to take contraception while she herself is on the three-month contraceptive vaccination. With a laugh she adds that she has more women in her sights to bring them into the family planning net.

The Umerkot Health Project is all about saving lives, says Shahab Anjum of CWSA. And Chehri of village Abid Ali Shah, a trained member of the village health committee did just that. There were two young married women in her village who both miscarried their first pregnancies. Kamla Bai had taught Chehri the imperative of the periodic ante-natal check-ups. When the two were pregnant again, Chehri took over and regularly escorted them to the Pithoro hospital for Sheena's ultrasound scan. The satisfaction is clear on Chehri's face when she says that today both women have had their first child. Now she has taken over drilling the importance of child spacing into their heads, she says.

The Taluka Headquarter Hospital at Samaro provides services identical to its counterpart at Pithoro. The one difference is that while Pithoro has a gynaecologist and Samaro a paediatrician. At Samaro, the staff had taken out the monthly health camp to village Abdul Ghafoor Khaskheli where Dr Anila and LHV Farkhanda were attending to a large group of women.

At the camp for four nearby villages, by early afternoon they had attended to over eighty cases ranging from diarrhoea to acute respiratory infection and some skin rashes, while some twenty women waited their turn. The majority of cases were ante and post-natal cases and lactating mothers.

'The Village Health Committees are very effective in passing around word of our visit,' says Farkhanda. With one voice she and Dr Anila relate that these committees have turned things around in their villages. Champa of the village committee, it is said, is the person to talk to. Not only does she aggressively advocate personal hygiene, she doubles as an advocate for education when she tells mothers and children that if they do not give off school, they too can be like Anila and Farkhanda and do so many useful things with their lives.

Champa is all praise for the health club in the local primary school where the CWSA team distributed soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste to the pupils. This being a periodic exercise during the project period, children do not want to miss school lest they be left out of the goodies. However, the important spinoff has been the sudden jump in school enrolment. As word got around of the handouts, out of school children wanted in too. If one is to believe Champa, there is hardly a child out of school in the village.

Postscript: Forty-eight year-old Nabi Baksh Solangi of village Khamiso Solangi suffered the loss of two daughters to cancer. In 2015, both girls, one twenty-two, the other just sixteen passed away from this life within months of each other. This tragedy so effected Nabi Baksh that he began to seek out ailing persons in his village who could not afford treatment and take them to hospital, even as far away as Karachi. Fortunate to have a small land holding, he bore all expenses from his own pocket. However, when his work became known in the village, other well-intentioned persons began to contribute as well.

Nabi Baksh was among the first person to be picked up by the CWSA team as member of the taluka Health Management Committee. The training followed and he got an overview of the twenty villages CWSA was working in. For long he had off and on been helping a childless couple, both of them differently abled. While Achro Bheel could walk with difficulty, his wife Indira was totally dependent and had to be carried around.

The first wheelchair that CWSA gave out to his management committee went to this poor couple. The husband began to wheel his wife out to the road passing by the village where he begged for alms. 'There are some good people in this world that's why God does not bring it to an end,' says Nabi Baksh. One such is the local landlord Haji Ghulam Mustafa Bhurgari. The couple's new visibility brought them to the attention of the good man and he has allocated a monthly stipend of Rs 1000 and a portion of wheat flour to last them through the month.

Encouraged by this success, Nabi Baksh proposed the name of eleven year-old Arjun, a special child of his village. His father Sheva Ram runs a tyre vulcanising shop in the Samaro bazaar and sends his children to school. All but young Arjun. The child got his wheelchair and now mobile, he has joined the local school in nursery where he is the oldest child in his class.

'You have to witness the child's happiness! With his meagre income, Arjun's father could not have got him the wheelchair and the poor child would never have gone to school,' says the good Samaritan.

On a closing note, he relates that since joining the health management committee, he has been instrumental in getting seven tube ligations of mothers who did not wish bigger families. As a member of the committee, he has come to know the entire muster of members from the village through taluka to the district. 'Every single person from these committees regardless of their level of education is a dedicated health worker who takes awareness raising especially on mother and child health issues very seriously,' says Nabi Baksh Solangi. A measure of this dedication is the sharp increase in hospital outpatient visits and increase in infant immunisation.

BHAGWANI THE TIRELESS CRUSADER

If there was something eighteen year-old Bhagwani and her four siblings knew well, it was hunger and poverty. Not that they were an exception in village Surto Menghwar on the high road from Umerkot to Chhor. Many other families lived under similar circumstances. Here the only work to be had was agricultural labour or, particularly for women, needlework.

From the first day she began to discern all about her, it was the abject, grinding scarcity of all that is necessary. If a dress became available for her elder sister, it was never discarded when the child grew out of it. It was passed down to Bhagwani. The same was the case with her three younger brothers. Their food was the simplest, comprising mostly of chilli paste and plain chapatti. And their tea was never flavoured with milk; it was always a black brew with a little sugar.

Bhagwani's father commuted daily to Umerkot a few kilometres away where he worked at his shoe polish stand from early morning until sunset. In 2021 the out and back fare came to Rs 60 while his daily earning was never more than Rs 300. In effect, therefore, he brought home a mere Rs 250. That was on good days, lean days being more frequent.

Her mother worked from home embroidering the traditional Sindhi cap. Those who know the cap, cannot but marvel at the intricacy of the tiny mirrors, sequins and the rich needlework. Understandably, it was hard work both on the hands and the eyes, each cap taking a full week to be completed. For this intense labour Bhagwani's mother received just Rs 25. In order to make Rs 200, she worked every minute she could spare from her housework to produce four caps a month.

Though there was a government school in the village, none of the siblings went to school. Instead, while Bhagwani and her elder sister helped with the housework and picked cotton in the season, her younger brother was packed off to Karachi to work as domestic help. At that time, the boy was just ten years old.

In 2015, field officers visited the village and Bhagwani's mother with her skill was at once picked out to join the training programme under CWSA's social enterprise called Taanka – Stitch in Sindh – that was to lead her to connect with the market. Bhagwani joined with her mother and if she missed anything in class, her mother coached her at home. Together the mother and daughter worked and for the first time it was considerably more than the Rs 25 she got for a week's work. Now it was no longer Sindhi men's headwear, now the mother and daughter produced one masterpiece after another each being picked off by a ready market that they were now connected to.

For the first time also now the mother was able to plan ahead. And the first plan was to wed Bhagwani's elder sister. Simultaneously, the family started to build their house. What was until then 'home' to them, was just a few stout upright bamboo poles covered with branches of the khip bush and

dried reeds. Now they built the mud-brick two-room house complete with the otaq for visitors and a living room for the family fronted by a walled-in compound.

But then misfortune struck. In 2019, Bhagwani's mother was diagnosed with bile duct stones. Treatment in Mirpur Khas, Hyderabad and even as far away as Karachi, however, did not help. Her illness eventually turned out to be cancer in an advanced stage. At length, not yet forty years of age, the suffering woman passed away in August 2021. By this time the family had spent some Rs 400,000 on her treatment. Of this three-fourths was what Bhagwani and her mother had saved from their joint income. The remaining Rs 100,000 was borrowed from their community.

The last tears had barely slid down her cheeks when Bhagwani

got back to work for now she was burdened with a debt. She pulled out her younger brother from school and arranged for him to join his sibling in his work in Karachi. That left only the youngest, just eight years old, in school. But this was the only recourse left to her because besides the debt Bhagwani had to repay, her brother already working in Karachi had taken an advance of Rs 50,000 to contribute to his mother's treatment.

Bhagwani says that when she and her mother worked together, their standard of living saw a marked improvement. From dining on chilli paste and chapatti they switched to vegetables and lentils. Time was when illness struck, they suffered stoically, silently at home relying on folk remedies. But after connecting with Taanka, they could afford the Umerkot hospital and proper medication. If only her mother had not fallen ill, two younger brothers would have been in school instead of one.

While her father's income has not improved, Bhagwani makes between Rs 8000-10,000 per month. That's when she gets good orders. Sometimes it is a little less, but even that is a sight better than that Rs 200 for thirty days of hard work her mother earned. She is confident that when she has helped her brothers' pay off their debt, they will all be living at home. Perhaps then, she adds, the younger one might be able to rejoin school.

And this, says Bhagwani, is all because she in on the Taanka team.

VILLAGE CHANESAR MARRI WINS ONE FOR THE WOMEN

itting within shouting distance of the town centre of Umerkot, village Haji Chanesar Marri, named after the local landlord, has a distinct veneer of Baloch culture because of the ethnicity of the leading family. Here women have always been second-class humanity. If these unfortunate women are from the marginalised and the so-called Scheduled Castes of Bheel, Kohli and Menghwar, they are the lowest in the estimation of those who are certainly not God's gift to the world.

In 2015, Kiran Bashir and her colleagues from CWSA visited the village to see if they could organise a group of artisans (Women Enterprise Groups as known under CWSA's Livelihood and Women Empowerment project). On a follow up visit a few days later, their car was stopped by some men and they were taken to the otaq of Haji Chanesar, the local landlord, who demanded to know what these 'city girls' were up to. He told them they were not to meddle in the ancient way of life and spread in his village what he thought were evil notions like liberation of women.

Kiran explained to the man that they were doing no such thing. That they were looking out to organise a group of artisans to train in marketing techniques so that they could build better lives for themselves. To this too the old man looked with undisguised suspicion and made it known that he did not approve, for if these women were to be kept busy in trainings and at needlecraft, who would pick his cotton and hoe his vegetable fields. The man forbade the team from ever returning to his village. Credit goes to the CWSA team for not giving up, however. They approached the man through those he knew in the government and eventually secured permission to work in village Chanesar Marri.

With the six-month training completed, Marva was earmarked to be the quality supervisor because of her outgoing personality, her energy and drive. Her group started off with twenty artisans of various ages. In November 2021, it had been pared down to fourteen with some of them having wedded had moved away from the village.

To say Marva is a skilled artisan of the famous Sindhi ralli, is a bit of an understatement. She is cordon bleu of the craft: on exhibit in her home was a piece the likes of which has never been seen by this writer who can claim to have seen rallis of almost every description. The asking price for the masterpiece: Rs 50,000 and that she had rendered after six months of painstaking work. Time was before being linked with the market at Karachi that Marva would not have attempted such a piece fore there would be no buyer in the village.

She says her husband who is a factory worker in Karachi where work is irregular was always hard put to see the children

through school. Marva contributed to this income in part by farm labour and mostly by needlework and embroidery that she sold in the village. For several days of very hard work, she never gleaned anything more than a few hundred rupees because that was all poor village women could afford to pay. The only concern of the couple was to see their four children through school and to do that, the family made do with very poor food and virtually negligible health care.

Things changed when she became part of the artisans' group, underwent the six-month Taanka programme training and became connected with the buyer's market. Just this graduation from disposing of her produce in the village to selling it to buyers in the city, made all the difference. Of a sudden, her income jumped several folds. Most months when orders flow in steadily, she can also save some from her income.

In the four years since she has been supervising the artisans' group, her older sons have moved into high school and her daughter is in grade 7. The commute of the three children out and back for school costs Rs 150 daily or nearly Rs 4000 per month. Then, since the children attend a private institution as against the government school earlier, there are fees and expenses on books and clothes which easily reaches about Rs 8000 per month.

In 2016, such an outlay was something Marva could not imagine would be within her means. Today the heavy expenditure on education does not deter Marva. She is determined to support her children all the way as far as they want to go in education.

Her husband now contributes to the food expenses only while

Marva takes care of the children's education. This means that there is more money to purchase better food than the ground green chillies and simple wheaten or millet chapatti, that was staple in bygone days.

Asked what would her children have been doing now had she not been a member of the artisans' group, Marva speaks unequivocally: "they would have finished grade five from the local government school and like their father the boys would have taken to factory labour and the girl would have been assisting Marva in producing cheap rallis and pillow covers."

KALAVANTI
THE GO-GETTER

Anyone can see that Kalavanti was the best choice to be the supervisor and a member of the steering committee of her group of artisans. She says she was selected because of the superior quality of her work. But that is not all. She is outgoing, confidently expressive and with marked flair for leadership. To top it, she is an exceptionally gifted artisan. But before the CWSA Taanka project reached Khararo Charan, Kalavanti was just another Bheel woman finding time out of her busy housework schedule to strain her eyes on her needlework that she sold in the village to make a few rupees. It was hardly an augmenting of her husband's meagre income as a factory worker.

In her own words, when the CWSA team first came to the village, there was a general sense of panic among the men. They saw it as the usurping of their superiority. Why, they would not permit their women to attend these meetings where they had no idea what they were being told. Hoori, somewhat older than the women of the artisans' group came forward to assure the men that as an elder she would keep an eye on the proceedings. She also lent her large front room as venue for the meetings. That blew over all right. But the question of women undergoing training was yet again an issue and once again Hoori came into play to quiet down the men.

The training behind them, Kalavanti's group was scheduled for an exposure visit to Karachi. Another furore ensued. Hoori played the women's advocate once again and prevailed because of her age and the respect she commanded. As they boarded the transport for the journey, the women of Khararo Charan for the first time felt a sense of freedom and the same entitlement they had always thought was the lot of men only. That was just the beginning, though. Now the artisans group members regularly take the bus to nearby Umerkot to purchase materials for their work.

With a twinkle in her eyes, Kalavanti says she has not just been to Hyderabad and Karachi. She flew to Islamabad in the big airplane for an exhibition in the capital. No man has yet had that experience in Khararo Charan, she adds.

Asked how much she earns a month, Kalavanti says it is enough to send her two children, both sons, to primary school and to plan for them to go through higher education in time and build better lives for themselves. Such ambitious forward planning had never been part of her thought process or that of the women she knows in her village.

Rather than speak of her own social and financial advancement, Kalavanti likes to point out Shanti who is in the group and has made a substantial saving from her earning that she added a room to her house. This room had been on the family's agenda for a long time, but it became possible only after Shanti's income got the boost. And there is Nali, whose husband faced a setback in 2020. A factory worker in Karachi, he met with an accident that fractured his leg. Given the state of healthcare in the country, the fracture was improperly set leaving the man

with a permanent disability and no longer capable of factory work. It is now Nali alone who feeds, clothes and educates her family. She says she earns more in a month than her husband did before his accident.

Playing the true leader, Kalavanti one by one points out individuals from her group. Sharda, she says has four children, the eldest of whom, an eighteen year-old son, dreams of being a doctor one day. Illiterate themselves, the parents cannot coach their son, so his after school tuitions have to be paid for by Sharda. This is besides three other school-going children all hoping to continue into college. If there were ever an example of the beginning of hope it is this family who had known nothing but abject poverty all along.

Dai would have lived in that same poverty after her husband passed away after a prolonged illness in 2005. She was still very young and her only child, a daughter, was just five. An expert with the needle thread, she made a meagre living selling her produce in the village. It was a long struggle with little hope in sight until she was selected to be part of the twenty women artisans group. With her daughter coming of age, Dai worked hard and saved even harder to wed off her daughter. Today, she lives a comfortable life and even helps her daughter from time to time.

To explain how it is possible for these women to make these seemingly impossible financial arrangements, Kalavanti asks Kaveeta to narrate her story. A master of the rich gaj work worn on women's shirt fronts in Thar and Rajasthan, Kaveeta, says that a typical piece takes up to two months to create. It is the only handicraft whose labour is worked out by weight.

The client determines how rich they want their piece to be and provide the necessary material for Kaveeta to work on.

Before she got on the team in 2017, one tola (11.66 grams) of gaj would fetch her at most Rs 200. Since a typical piece weighs about seven tolas, the worth of two months of hard work was just Rs 1400. However, depending on the quality of the work required by the customer, it could sometimes be less. And then, gaj being a pricey item and worn mostly on special occasions, it was not often that Kaveeta was busy.

She says she joined the group because she felt she would get work more regularly. And then there was the training that made all the difference when she learned of summer and winter colours, traditional and family colours and colour combinations to catch the eye. For the first time Kaveeta also learned how to negotiate and demand payment commensurate with the hard work that goes into each gaj piece.

An important aspect of the six-month training was being weaned away from the thick, coarse fabric they had always worked on. The brand names they now deal with want finer material and Kaveeta says this was her big breakthrough. With a well-known brand in Karachi lapping up her gaj and paying her Rs 800 per tola, Kaveeta now earns upward of Rs 15,000 per month.

Widowed in 2020, Kaveeta is now the sole bread winner for her two little boys and a girl. The children all go to school and Kaveeta has pledged to herself to see them to the highest level they would like to attain.

To conclude, Kalavanti said time was when she and all these other women in the group had to look to their husbands for household expenses. But now, they are all their own masters. In fact, she says with triumph in her voice, they can now give pocket money to their husbands when they are out of work.

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