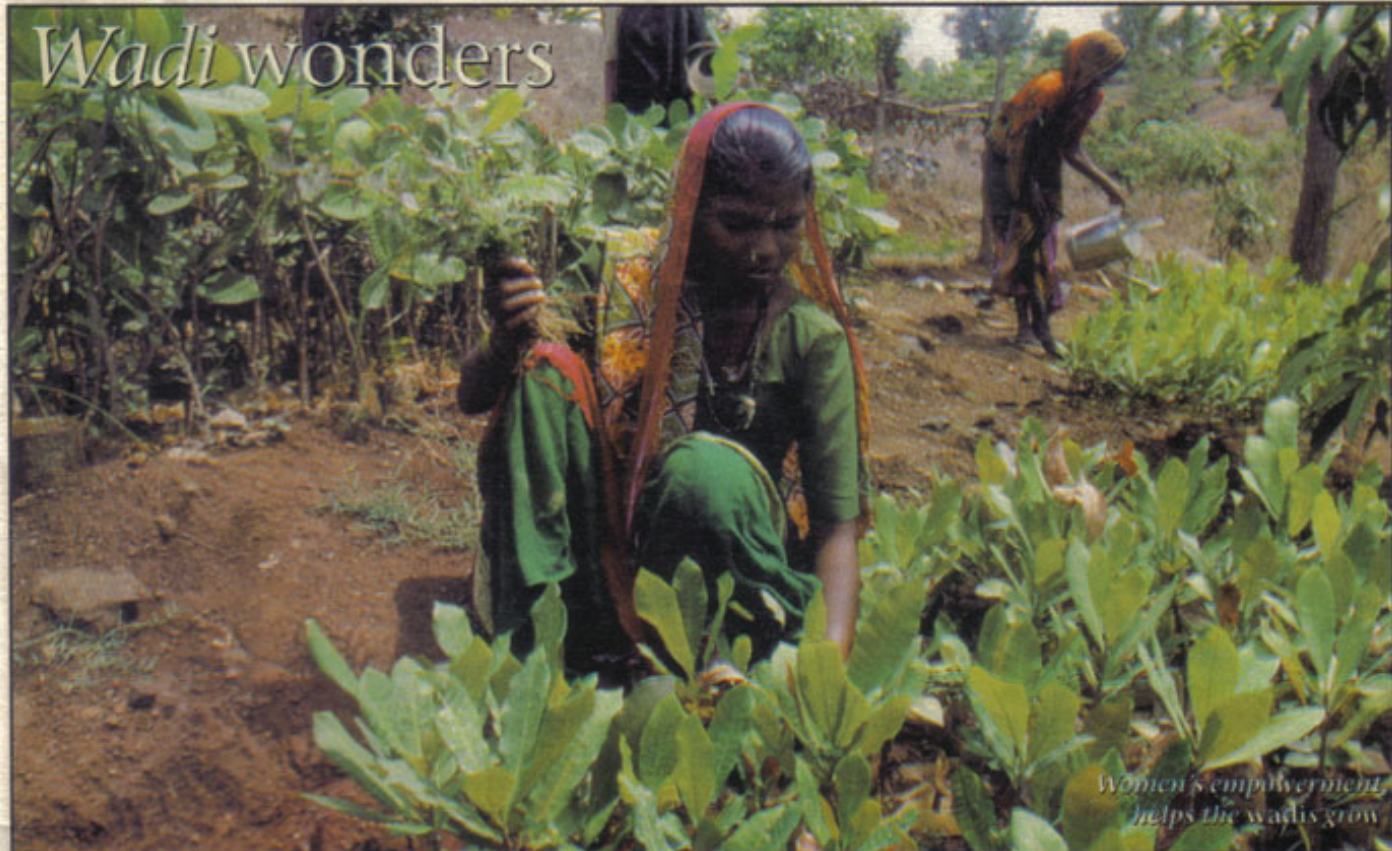


## Wadi wonders



PHOTOS: PRAKASH JADHAV

*Women's empowerment helps the wadis grow*

**An NGO set up by Gandhi aide Manibhai Desai has helped lead thousands of tribal families out of abject poverty into prosperity in Dharampur taluka of Gujarat**

Two in every three Adivasis in the area were suffering from malnutrition, and every fourth tribal was actually starving. Less than a decade ago, this was the profile of Dharampur taluka in south Gujarat's Valsad district, according to a sample of the Indian Institute of Management. Enter the BAIF Development research Foundation, set up in 1967 by Mahatma Gandhi's aide Manibhai Desai. BAIF, formerly the Bharatiya Agro Industries Foundation, had already implemented a successful rehabilitation programme in the adjoining Vansda tribal block under Desai's personal leadership, beginning in 1982. So it was the obvious choice as the agency to implement a similar project in Dharampur.

The Rs50-crore project, funded by the German Bank for Reconstruction, Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), is more of the same thing that BAIF has done in Vansda — help the tribals build *wadis* (orchards) on their hilly, barren land to grow mango and cashew trees. "The participating fami-

lies have the hope of coming out of poverty in four to five years," says N.G. Hegde, president of BAIF. They have; the programme, initiated in 1995 by BAIF and its local organisation Dharampur Utthan (upliftment) Vahini, Dhruva, has already helped rehabilitate 7,500 families by developing 3,000 hectares of wastelands. "The vicious circle of migration, poverty and exploitation has been broken," says BAIF executive vice-president G.G. Sohani — a claim borne out by the large number of houses built on the *wadis* of people who hitherto left the area every season to find work as farm labourers.

"BAIF had already some experience with similar projects in Gujarat and a good reputation for agricultural development programmes," says Christian Haas, project officer, India division, at the Frankfurt-based KfW. Beginning with just over 80 villages because of the tribals' initial suspicion, the programme has spread to the targeted 133 villages in the hilly tracts of Dharampur. "The already established Vansda project

helped establish our credibility here," says A.L. Joshi, vice-president of BAIF. "We also organised skits to interest and involve the villagers."

But the programme is only for families which have at least half a hectare of land, explains project officer Pratap Pednekar. So, the 25 to 30 per cent who don't have any land, and 10 per cent who have very small holdings, are not covered; of the rest, about 60 per cent are within Dhruva's fold. BAIF — and Dhruva — stress the involvement of the family, and not the village, as a unit. Each family puts its own available wasteland knowledge and skills to better use, and builds productive assets with new technology and resources from outside — planting a *wadi* with trees which they nourish on a co-operative basis. Living in a high-rainfall area receiving an average of 200 cm a year, the tribals need to be taught how to harvest this water — with bunds made of empty cement bags filled with riverbed sand, and retaining walls down-slope from each tree. Some 700-odd handpumps have been installed in



the area, and one mechanically-minded villager is nominated by his peers to be trained so that maintenance and repairs can be handled locally.

Every village, or 'pada', has a field guide, health guide and 'barefoot accountant', who are paid a fixed retainer out of the project funds and additional wages according to the quantum of work they do. The women-folk have also been got together to form over a hundred self-help groups of five or six members each. Shivram Kisan Gangorda, health guide at Dikshal village, has been schooled till the tenth standard, and trained to take a blood-sample slide from a malaria patient besides chlorinating wells, administering drugs like paracetamol and carrying out a monthly vaccination programme. "When I can't handle a case, I refer it to the primary health centre or hospital," Gangorda says.

Dhruva's success stories are many — there are examples of courage and determination in the face of adversity, as well as fatalism of "I'll do what you say but it'll do me no good!" Gopi Namdeo's husband died in an accident two years after they started their *wadi*. With three small children — the eldest, a boy of 12 — she worked on her own to make a go of their small, hilltop *wadi* in Dikshal and set an example of the project's aim of helping people stand on their own feet and meet their basic needs.

At the other end of the spectrum is septuagenarian Chillya Manu of Niloshi village, who entered the project saying, "What's the use, will I get to eat the fruit?" Five years on, Manu's pessimism proved misplaced: he and his five grown-up sons have two thriving half-hectare *wadis* with mango and cashew trees. But the old man still grumbles: "It's too much trouble! I had to clear the land, I still have to chase away goats. I have no clothes, I am here all the time!"

"It was apparent that the food insecurity was, among other factors, caused and worsened by the rapid degradation of the natural resources," says Haas. KFW's monetary support, spread over an eleven-year period, is therefore meant to remedy this and nip the migration problem in the bud. Families which came into the programme with an annual income of



Sustainability is the test, says Hegde

Rs4,000 to Rs8,000 will be earning Rs25,000 a year soon, with the work they have done in the last four years literally bearing fruit now. "In the old project area, some families have even reached the level of Rs60,000 a year," says Hegde.

#### Livelihood than employment

But sustainability beyond the grant period is just as important — so BAIF is also helping the villagers with quality control and marketing linkages, as well as developing credit linkages for their continuing needs after 2006. And in Vandsa, the BAIF campus houses processing units which produce 25 tonnes of mango pulp and 250 tonnes of pickles a year for the farmers' co-operatives it helped set up, besides a fledgling drying and shelling facility for the new cashew crop from Dharampur. "The accent is on livelihood rather than employment," explains Sohani, whom the Vandsa villagers have anointed Manibhai Desai's successor. "This is crucial."

True to its Gandhian traditions, BAIF insists on beneficiaries giving up liquor, and concentrates on the holistic development of the individual through health, awareness generation and literacy. This is the only way to improve the quality of life, its officials point out. Most other programmes are vertical, concentrating on only agriculture, or health.

Hasmukh Kharecha, executive officer of Dhruva, tells the story of a landless woman who approached Manibhai Desai for help to start a *wadi*. "Your husband is a drunkard!" Desai told her. "But I am not," she retorted. "I need your help." So Manibhai got the government to grant her a half-hectare plot of scrub land, on which BAIF helped her plant trees. "The husband saw how well she was doing, and gave up liquor to join her," recalls Kharecha. The doctor — a graduate in vedic medicine — is only one of the 60-odd people with advanced academic qualifications who work for BAIF. "There are post-graduates in agriculture, engineers, accountants... but Manibhai always said Ph Ds and M Scs are of no use to us unless they are committed," says Kharecha. So before newcomers are put into the field, they are given mission training to ensure they form a motivated work force, prepared to live in interior villages for years on end. And though the BAIF brass takes an active interest, visiting villages and going into details, the field staff has been given decision-making powers so that there are no bureaucratic delays in taking necessary steps.

Care is also taken to ensure that the beneficiaries of the programme do not become totally dependent on BAIF support. "There is no charity," says Pednekar. "We even charge for the medicines, though at concessional



rates. We are creating a habit of paying for things." BAIF provides a wage support of Rs1,500 to Rs2,000 a year for *wadi* development activities, to keep one member on site during the five-year gestation period. The financial funding is, however, reduced and the people's contribution raised annually for all support — soil conservation, farm implements, technical know-how, pesticides and saplings including thorny forestry plants to use as fencing along the *wadi* periphery.

Dhruva conducts regular health and hygiene camps, where primary and common ailments are treated; and local midwives — *dais* — are involved in ante-natal registrations to identify high risk factors, thus helping bring down mother mortality and increasing the birth rate. Nutritional advice and guidance to start perennial kitchen gardens are also on tap. A new diet additive for children which Kharecha is excited about is the 'Hyderabad mix', containing wheat, groundnut and *chana dal* and providing an input of 300 calories per 100 grammes to combat severe 'Grade 3' malnutrition. "The over-worked mothers don't have the time to make special foods for the undernourished children," explains Deepti Chirumalay, a paediatrician working with BAIF. "This is the ideal supplement, and tastes good too. We could even sell it in shops at, say, Rs 5 a packet."

#### A success story

The latest is the 30-odd nurseries set up by the local women. "This group of five women invested Rs2,000 for 500 saplings and another Rs6,000 later," says Paruben Chaudhary, a 'development animator' with Dhruva at Karjun village. "Now they have 3,000 saplings, which BAIF is buying at Rs17 for distribution to its new *wadis*. Each woman has earned more than Rs10,000." The idea, explains Pednekar, is to create planting material locally, and stop getting the saplings from Maharashtra's Konkan region. The women contribute to the Rs 6 paid every year by each family to their bare-foot accountant Raoji Budhabhai Bhoje, who maintains their accounts and minutes of their group meetings. Bhoje, who has passed the eighth standard, gets a salary — of which Dhruva



Too much trouble, grumbles Manu, who has two thriving *wadis*

paid 75 per cent in the first year, cutting back to nil in Y4.

But though BAIF's original project area of Vansda is totally self-sufficient financially, the villagers still look to the NGO for both advice and support in a dozen different spheres. BAIF veterinarians continue to visit cattle owners, agriculture experts help fight pests and tree diseases, and veterans like Vansda programme in-charge Rajendrasinh Mahida provide what he calls 'techno-management services'.

The project's genesis 15 years ago was when industrialist Arvind Mafatlal requested Manibhai Desai to take on the handling of a welfare programme he had launched. But where Mafatlal had conceived it as charity, giving away clothes and blankets — which the donees sold — Desai visited the villagers and learnt what they wanted: to emulate the big *wadi* holders for whom they were working. Still, only 42 families came forward when he started his *wadi* programme — but they stayed, and the numbers grew. Today, the tribals have set up the Vasundhara Cooperative Society which helps 300 families earn a livelihood by making

pickles to supply Mumbai's Apna Bazar co-operative store chain.

The Vansda *wadis* originally had only mangoes, but the farmers are now experimenting with new crops: at Chonda village, Nanubhai Chimanbhai Gavit grows 'parwal' (pointed gourd) while others get good crops of beetroot, elephant root ('turan') and onions. A proud symbol of the project's success is Babaliya Radakiya Gaonda, whose father used to make liquor and who himself used to trek long distances to find work as a farm labourer. Now, his elder daughter is a graduate, his son is in his final year at college and his younger daughter is in the 12th standard.

For the future, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) is helping the farmers of Dharampur create a 'sound credit history' for direct credit linkage with banks. NABARD, which is responsible for channelising the KFW funds, monitoring their use and co-ordination at the national level, is also involved in the 'Abhyutthan yojana' in Vansda. "The scheme, covered under the 'revolving fund assistance' granted to various NGOs, envisages financing of 300 non-defaulting tribal farmers for various income generating activities, at Rs5,000 each," explains NABARD deputy general manager A. Lahiri.

BAIF is now spreading the good word — and the good work. In partnership with KFW, it plans to launch a similar programme in Maharashtra. "It will be designed along the lines of Gujarat, but will of course be tailored to the agricultural needs of the project area — for example, different trees will be planted," says KFW's Haas. "We are also planning for another programme in Rajasthan, although this is at a very early stage of preparation." KFW is financing agricultural development programmes with a strong emphasis on natural resources protection in many other parts of the world too; but comparison with the Dharampur project is difficult because they are 'not implemented according to a blueprint', he adds. Whether the *wadis* compare favourably with other programmes or not, Manibhai Desai would be happy if he could see that the fire still burns, six years after his demise.

♦ SEKHAR SESHAN