

Devuben Pandya and the Mahiti Trust: A Journey of Grassroots Empowerment in Gujarat's Bhal Region (In the Words of Dr. Bharat Bhagat) Translated Version from Gujarati



When an individual is fuelled by unwavering determination, self-belief, and an indomitable spirit to work tirelessly, no obstacle—whether related to education, background, or circumstance—can impede their progress. The story of **Mrs. Devuben Pandya** is a testament to this truth. Despite having studied only up to the seventh standard, she has accomplished extraordinary work in women's empowerment and rural development that would challenge even the most well-educated professionals. Her journey, rooted in the deeply disadvantaged coastal region of Bhal in Gujarat, is both inspiring and transformative.

Understanding the Bhal Region: A Land of Harsh Realities

The Bhal region, located along the coastal belt of Gujarat, is marked by its saline soil and groundwater due to its proximity to the sea. Agricultural activities are mostly restricted to the monsoon season, with the land lying fallow the rest of the year. The region grapples with chronic poverty, illiteracy, superstitions, and a severe lack of basic amenities. Women, in particular, bear the brunt of this hardship, often living in conditions that severely compromise their dignity and opportunities.

An Early Vision of Change

In 1979, a group of 4 students from the Ahmedabad Study Action Group (ASAG) visited the Bhal region to study its socio-economic landscape. At the time, Mrs. Devuben Pandya was running a *Balwadi* (early childhood center) in Bhangarh village. Her grassroots presence and deep rapport with the local women made her a natural collaborator for the ASAG team. With insight and empathy, she began addressing the pressing issue of reproductive health—introducing and advocating for family planning at a time when awareness was minimal. Her efforts earned her recognition from the district health authorities and laid the foundation for her larger mission.

Establishing Mahiti Trust: A Beacon of Hope

Recognizing the need for sustained, collective action to address the region's systemic issues, Mrs. Pandya established **Mahiti Trust** in 1994 with the support of Utthan. The organization envisioned a just, equitable society free from exploitation and discrimination, where even the most marginalized could live with dignity and self-reliance. From its inception, Mahiti Trust committed itself to inclusive development, with a particular emphasis on empowering women as agents of change.

Despite enormous challenges—saline land, water scarcity, poor infrastructure, exploitative lending practices, and limited livelihood opportunities—Mahiti Trust has made significant strides over three decades. Today, it operates in more than **180+ villages** across **Ahmedabad, Bhavnagar, and Botad districts**, consistently expanding its outreach and impact.

Innovative Water Solutions in a Thirsty Land

One of the region's most urgent challenges has been access to potable water. Groundwater here is highly saline, and conventional wells are ineffective. Mahiti Trust tackled this crisis by partnering with the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board to construct **plastic-lined rainwater harvesting ponds** in **20 villages**, benefiting over **45,000 families**.

In addition, more than **8,500 household-level rooftop rainwater harvesting tanks** have been built benefiting **59,500 people**. These tanks, constructed in the courtyards of rural homes, collect and store monsoon rainwater—offering a sustainable, community-driven solution to drinking water scarcity. So effective was this intervention that the state government later scaled the model across Gujarat, offering 70% financial support to below poverty line (BPL) families and 50% to those above the poverty line (APL). Even with tap water connections under the Jal Jeevan Mission now in place, inconsistent supply has made these tanks a vital backup. Their value is such that families often lock them before leaving their homes.

Economic Empowerment through Women-Led Cooperatives

Faced with systemic debt traps perpetuated by exploitative landlords and moneylenders, Mahiti Trust promoted women-led financial cooperatives. It established:

- **Bhal Women's Savings and Credit Cooperative Society** in Ahmedabad district, with over 6,500 rural women members.
- **Bhal Women's Jagruti Savings and Credit Cooperative Society** in Bhavnagar district, with around 4,500 members.

Together, these cooperatives oversee 555+ savings and credit groups, helping women escape the clutches of high-interest loans. From initial savings of just Rs. 2–5, members now routinely save Rs. 100–500 per month. The cooperative's current **annual turnover exceeds Rs. 2.50+ crore**, demonstrating both its financial strength and the growing economic agency of its members.

Strengthening Community Health Services

Access to healthcare in remote villages remains limited and costly. Recognizing this, Mahiti Trust trained **105 local women health workers** and **130 traditional midwives (dais)** to address primary health concerns and facilitate safe childbirths within their communities. Many of these women have since become **Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs)** under the government health system. These grassroots efforts have brought vital health services within reach of the most isolated populations, saving both lives and financial resources.

Linking People with Government Schemes

A significant barrier to development in rural India is the lack of awareness about government schemes. Mahiti Trust plays a crucial role in **raising awareness, assisting with documentation, and ensuring that entitlements reach the right beneficiaries**. The Trust's team of community facilitator also work tirelessly to promote sustainable agriculture.

Promoting Organic Farming for Livelihood Security

With conventional agriculture yielding little due to poor soil and water conditions, Mahiti Trust has championed **organic farming** as a viable alternative. Through training in biofertilizers and biopesticides, more than **4,000 farmers** have transitioned to organic practices and obtained certification through the **Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA)**.

Under the **2015 Organic Farming Policy of the Government of Gujarat**, Mahiti Trust has facilitated incentive support of **Rs. 5,000 per hectare** for eligible farmers. This shift not only improves soil health and sustainability but also enhances farmers' resilience to market shocks and climate change.

Legacy of Devuben Pandya and Mahiti Trust

The story of Mrs. Devuben Pandya and Mahiti Trust is one of transformative leadership born out of lived experience, empathy, and an unyielding commitment to justice. It is a reminder that real change often begins in the margins—led by those who are most affected, yet most courageous.

From drinking water security and women's economic independence to grassroots healthcare and organic farming, Mahiti Trust's work is a shining example of how local knowledge, community participation, and visionary leadership can create lasting impact—even in the most adverse conditions.