Levhaat is located about 25 km from Chhota Udepur city. A relatively new concrete road leads us to the house where Ditliben lives with her son and daughter-in-law. Ditliben Tersingh Rathwa is definitely more than hundred years old, her daughter–in-law vows. She knows this with certainty because her father and Ditliben were of the same age and her father had turned hundred a few years back. He passed away last year.

As she comes out of her small hut, we notice Ditliben's frail physique. Yet, despite her frailties she manages to move around with a walking stick. She takes a seat and smiles. She does not understand why we are there to meet her.

She relaxes and tells us about her life. She had a very difficult childhood. She lost her mother at a very young age. Her father too passed away soon and she was orphaned. She had to struggle to meet her daily food needs. She would ask her neighbours if they had some food left for her. The neighbourhood was also very poor. As kids they used to play with pebbles because they did not have any means to buy toys.

When pressed about the changes she has seen over the years, she says that she has seen really bad times in her early years. Her later life, she says, was much better. In her remote village, there was hardly anything available when she was young. They wore very little clothing and never wore shoes. If they ever saw shoes in the village, they knew they would either belong to the British or to the hawaldars (constables). The food she used to eat in those times did not have much variety. They used to have rotlas made of kodra [Paspalum scrobiculatum Linn.] and shamel [Echinochloa colona (L.) Link]. They never saw white rice. They also did not know of tea!

She fondly remembers the times when British officers used to pay visits. Some missionaries would visit as well and they were very kind. Sometimes the local king’s men would come and they would be taken for a few days for forced labour.

Ditliben had a harsh but very active childhood. Most of the day she would grind flour or go to fetch water. She remembers she started doing all this at the age of 5. They used to walk around 20 kilometres a day since nothing was close-by and they did not have any means of transport available.

She says that the farmers at the time never used chemical fertilisers. They used neem juice for most common ailments. For fracture, they used to fill a cloth with fenugreek flour and tie it around the broken area. They cooked kunvariya ni bhaji [made from Senna tora (L.) Roxb.] which was rich in nutrients. Shantilal Pandya, a retired teacher who visited accompanied us confirmed that the plant contained iodine and proteins.

The water level, she concedes, has gone down. So has the rainfall. Rainfall also is delayed nowadays, she adds. The climate was good back then. Now the winters are colder, too.

Marriages back in her time were simple affairs. The bride and the groom exchanged a piece of jaggery to signify completion of the formalities of the wedding. The girls would then go in the cart while the groom came home dancing with the men jiving to the beats of drums. In their culture, she adds, drums were beaten even on death.

Her life was very simple, she says, like her food which had only salt and very little, if any, spices.

[Scout: Chintan Shinde. Special thanks to the entire teacher’s team of Anand School (especially, Kesharshibhai Rathwa, Manish Parmar, Ritesh Solanki, Arunbhai Rathwa Dhandhuka and Shantilal Pandya retired teacher, Tejgagh for assisting with the scouting.]