The role of women in the survival of disadvantaged households in high-risk environments is well recognized. However, what often goes unnoticed is the inventive and innovative contributions women make in coping with stress, conserving diversity and using natural resources and pursuing off-farm enterprises. The latent wisdom of these women has been brought out by Chiman Parmar. He interviewed Gangaben Ramjibhai Makwana, a living archive of traditional knowledge for his post graduate thesis, “The Role of Centurion Ladies in creations and innovations (with particular reference to Gadhada-Umarala region)”. He had earlier worked with SRISTI for several years as a devoted field researcher.

**Early Life**

After the death of her parents when she was merely five or six years, Gangaben went to Mumbai to stay with her maternal uncle. Her uncle had gone to Mumbai to escape the wrath of the great famine during 1956 (Vikram Era 1898 AD) and had started working as a peon in an office there. She lived with her uncle until she was eighteen. She got married to Ramjeebhai Makwana. Even after her marriage, Gangaben stayed on in Mumbai, until her in-laws brought her back to Gujarat after six years. When she returned to her native state, Gangaben saw the famine herself. This reminded her of all the tales of hardship that her uncle had narrated to her. To escape the famine, Gangaben’s family soon shifted their base to Surat. Her life took a new turn as Gangaben, who had been used to the urban life of Mumbai, now had to start working in the fields picking cotton. Later, the entire family shifted to Kohad village. Her husband, Ramjibhai Makwana, was a mason by profession. He practiced his profession in the village and in fact, continued to work as a mason till 1946.

Gangaben stayed away from her native village, Samthipara, for 64 years. When the family returned to their house, it was in a dilapidated state and had to be rebuilt. Having no agricultural land of their own, they bought 10 bighas of cultivable land and today, they own 75 bighas of land in that area. Her sons are involved in masonry and agricultural work.

**Reflections**

Sharing her experiences and feelings, Gangagben was very critical of the current inorganic farming practices. She commented on such practices in the form of a limeric:

“Bajre ma dava, ghau ma dava
Khetar ma dava, paani ma dava
Raaste dava, ne dawakhanama dava
Jya juwo tyu dava ne dava
Seem ma dava, gaum ma dava
Ghare dava bahar dava
Dhorne dava, ne manasne dava”

(Medicines in the fields, medicines in the water bodies, medicines in homes and hospitals. As far as one can see, it’s medicines and medicines. Its terrible effects can be visualised everywhere, whether in the fields, on animals or human beings.)

Blaming these drugs for being the root cause for the decay in the health conditions of people, Gangaben observed “The resistance power is all gone and life span has decreased. Even the animals are not energetic enough nowadays.” “Na rahyo khorak ma dum ke na rahyo manas ma dum, ke nathi rahyo dhor ma dum,” she says.

Punning smartly on the word “dum” which means energy as well as disease in Gujarati, Gangaben continued “dum to have dawakhanama ane chadshe dum pachi manasoma ke swasthi bharpur thai jashe.” (Now energy is only to be found in the hospitals and once you get it, you will be healthy)

It was amazing to see that even at the age of 107, Gangaben had retained her original set of teeth. Revealing the secret of her healthy teeth, she said that she never eats or drinks anything too hot or too cold. Until two years back, she never even drank tea, she added. Mention of tea led her to share an interesting anecdote.

During the battle between Ram and Ravana, Lakshman got seriously injured and lost consciousness. Hanuman was sent to get the Sanjeevani herb which could revive Lakshman. The Sanjeevani herb which Hanuman got was apparently a tea plant. Though they proved to be a lifesaver, the tea plant continued to...
feel neglected and at one point, even confronted Lakshman. He told them that even though people did not show enough respect, in Kaliyug, their value would be fully appreciated them that though people did not respect them now, in Kaliyug, people would start their day by taking tea as the first drink in the morning.

Gangaben has travelled far and wide within the country. She has undertaken pilgrimages to Badrinath, Kedarnath, Haridwar, Kashi, Rishikesh, Ramjhula, Lakshmanjhula, the foothills of Himalayas, Triveni Sangam, Kolkata and Porbandar. She can still recollect the names of all the places that she went to. She even boasts of knowing the local dialects of those places, but age has withered away some of those remembrances.

Gangaben has seen insignias change on the coins for as many as nine times. However, she could recollect details of only some of them. These were insignias of King George, Queen Victoria, King Edward and Gandhiji. According to Gangaben, earlier currencies were of different kinds. She mentioned silver, copper, bronze, iron, steel and aluminum coins as well as the latest paper currency. Gangaben recalls that essential items did not cost the earth. One tola of silver would cost six annas, 1 tola gold would come for Rs 10, and one kilogramme of ghee would cost one pai.

Gangaben was instrumental in starting a bhajan mandali in her native village. Every month, the mandali would ask for contributions from the villagers and deposit the money in a bank. This money was then utilised in loans that were given to needy people. This practice is still followed.

As they had a close bond with nature, people earlier had special knowledge about the directions of the wind, especially of the moisture laden monsoon winds. This helped them in calculating the timing of the approaching monsoons and plan their crop sowing accordingly. Gangaben, too, has her share of knowledge on the subject.

According to her, if the wind blows from the southwest direction on the day of Akha Treej (the third day of Vaishakh month), then the monsoons would be good. Earlier, even when it rained 12 villages away, the villagers would welcome the rains by beating the traditional drums (dhols and nagaras) and singing songs.

The Experimenter

While talking about the food habits in earlier times, Gangaben said that people used to consume plenty of milk and milk products. Flour, too, was obtained from the traditional grinder. Gangaben finds the flour that is ground in the mills tasteless. This, she says, also reflects on the health and well being of people these days.

Earlier, one would hardly find people afflicted by minor ailments like fever or indigestion, which, she says, plague modern man to his death-bed. Gangaben says that during the famine, they would consume vegetable items prepared from kanjara leaves, tandarda, kharkhor (Leptadenia pyrotechnica), buds of phag and vaseti and ekad leaves. Now, she laments, one doesn’t see these plants being used much.

She also provided information about several practices for animal care and sustainable agriculture. One can learn so much from her. May her knowledge last long and survive beyond her mortal life.

Recipes of uncultivated plants from Gangaben’s kitchen

Vaseti ni bhaji (Vegetable of vaseti leaves)

Leaves of the vaseti creeper are collected, washed and then boiled till they become tender. They are then fried and salt and chillies are added. A simple vegetable preparation, it is very tasty as well as nutritious.

Ekad ni bhaji (Vegetable of ekad leaves)

The ekad leaves are tiny like those of amla. The ekad tree grows to a height of 7-8 ft. Its fruits, known as sing, are also eaten. These leaves too are prepared the same way as the vaseti vegetable.

Ripe ringni (Solanum xanthocarpum) are plucked, deseeded, washed and sun-dried. The dry fruit is then powdered. This powder is then mixed with the flour of jowar or bajra and the dough is flattened into chapattis. These chapattis are not only tasty but also nutritious.