Jiviben Harkhabhai, 103, has seen her village grow from two households initially in the saline lands of Kharaghoda. She was born in Navrangpura village near Patdi. They were three sisters and three brothers but she is the only one out of them who has secured such a long life. Her husband, Harkhabhai, 103, is a very witty person. On being asked their names, he gives a prompt reply: “Ame bey harkha” meaning ‘both of us are same.’ They got married at the age of 12-13 years.

Harkhabhai’s father used to weave and sell cotton quilts and blankets. He recalls fond memories of his brothers and sisters with whom they had fought and played for long. They played games like ‘gedi-dada’ and another game in which they chased a wheel hitting it with a stick at the same time.

Testing Times in Life

They had six daughters and two sons. The older son died due to chicken pox. Jiviben’s eyes get wet as she says: “His marriage preparations were going on at that time.” Recalling the days when she was tortured by her mother-in-law for want of a grandson, she says: “I was made to work day and night as my first son died and thereafter I had six daughters. Nobody helped me with household work. I was allowed to eat only when my mother-in-law gave a plate to me. I had nowhere to go as I had lost my father at a very young age and all my brothers too. Whenever he (Harkhabhai) defended me, my father-in-law beat him.” To this, Harkhabhai adds: “It pained me to see her plight but I couldn’t raise my voice against my father.” But they resolved to chart out their own path after their seventh child was born. They left their home with virtually nothing to live on. They built a shed and lived. Jiviben adds emotionally: “I had just one sari, the one which I had worn then. I spread half of it on the ground and with the remaining half, I covered my son. My paternal aunt gave us two blankets to survive the winter.”

Survival - A Challenge During Famines

They have seen five famines in their life out of which three were terrible, they say. At that time, both of them worked at Viramgam. Jiviben built farm bunds. There used to be rationing of food grains. They were allowed to carry only 2.5 kg of grains and that too not beyond the boundaries of their village. She recalls an incident when she carried 20 kg of grains on her head from Viramgam to Mithaghoda: “I carried two daughters on my back like Rani Laxmibai and the grains on my head. On the way, a person unknown to me gesticulated to a policeman to inquire about me. When the policeman called me out loud, I immediately boarded a train ignoring him. The other policeman told him that I must be deaf. After that, when the ticket checker asked for my ticket, I told him that when I don’t have money to buy food, how will I buy a ticket? I got down the train at Kharaghoda and walked all the way to Mithaghoda and it was dark by the time I reached. I must have been 30-35 years old then.” Yet, she likes those days because things were much cheaper then. Quoting some prices she says: “I could get 85 kg jaggery or 10 kg grains in Re 1. I could buy 93 g gold in Rs. 50 and 280 g of silver in Re. 1.”

Annotating the Feudal System

Both of them were salt-workers. They also worked as farm labourers for a decade from 1940 to 1950. At the age of 50, when Harkhabhai had enough savings, he bought two small patches of land and built two small houses at an expense of Rs. 60. Their
son Mehrabhai elucidates that the amount of mud and sand that his parents carried manually must be more than what a truck can carry in one trip. Throwing light on the feudal system, they say: “We were labourers on the farm of Dayabhai. Our village Mithaghoda was in the territory of Zinzuwada state in those days. During harvest, a person came from the durbar’s (feudal lord) place and weighed the crop. Then, the assignee from our village carried half the produce of all farms to the durbar.” They used to grow cotton, millet and mung beans (Vigna mungo L.) in Dayabhai’s farm. After seeing seventy summers, Harkhabhai bought 25 bigha land for Rs. 5000. Today, one bigha land is priced at Rs. 30000. He has given away this land to some farmers on lease and gets his share of income from them regularly.

Raising Children

Jiviben recalls: “My children grew up consuming a meagre meal of dry rotis. They kept crying everyday while waiting for us to come back from work.” Jiviben bought a chakki (flour grinding mill) in Rs. 2.50 in those days. They could educate only their son till class 10th. When they had to relocate during to a famine, they left him in a school at Patdi to prevent a break in his studies. Her son had just two pairs of clothes at that time. Their daughters are married now and are reasonably happy in their homes now. There were no hospitals in those days, so when her children had fever, Jiviben used to grind fresh neem leaves (Azadirachta indica A.Juss.), soak these overnight in water and give them the decoction. When they had sprain in limbs, she used to get saffron (Crocus sativus L.) from a nearby temple, mix it with water and give them. For stomach ache, she used to grind seeds of gegda (grey emetic nut, Xeromphis uliginosa (retz.) Maheshwari) and seeds of kanksa no golo (buduc nut Caesalpinia crista L.), add castor oil (Ricinus communis L.) and dilute it with water and make the ailing child consume it orally. She hasn’t tasted tea till date. They had two buffaloes; hence they made ghee and sold it. Once when a buffalo had stopped eating and drinking, Jiviben heated two cubes of camphor in edible oil and rubbed the solution on her stomach. She herself also applies the same on any part of her body when it aches.

Concern for Environment

Describing the climatic conditions in those days, they say: “These days, it rained hardly for an hour at a stretch. We have seen days in our childhood when it used to rain unceasingly for a month. The climate was much cooler those days. The atmospheric temperature has been increasing significantly for last 30-35 years. We also faced kaali aandhis which caused a lot of destruction to crops.” The couple is quite annoyed with the incessant cutting of trees and depletion of diversity of vegetation from mother Earth. They don’t find certain trees much now a days like mitha jaaru (Salvadora persica Wall), gundy (Cordia gharaf Ehrenb. ex Asch.) and gegdi (Xeromphis uliginosa (retz.) Maheshwari). Jiviben used to cook khichadi with white seeds of a particular grass called hamu which grew in small areas encircling ponds in her village but it doesn’t grow anymore. Harkhabhai named some animals too, like sim bilaudi (Falis chausa), naar (species of fox, Canis vulpes), jarakh (striped hyena) and an insect called chit ghoda (species of grasshopper) which were a frequent sight long ago. He says that these days pythons and wolves, even vultures are not seen much.

Making Life Light

Harkhabhai and Jiviben share some amusing instances from their life. Harkhabhai says with pride: “When I get angry, she keeps on pacifying me and requesting me to eat.” Jiviben says: “He is short-tempered but I never retaliate as I have endured other’s wrath throughout my life.” She likes to watch religious serials like Ramayana. To this, Harkhabhai comments: “Shivji will be happy with your devoutness and take you away in a special aeroplane.”

Their son Mehrabhai who works in State Reserve Police in Surat, took them to his home once. Jiviben enjoyed being there but Harkhabhai had difficulties conversing with people as most of them spoke Marathi. Hence, he returned to Mithaghoda around following him, Jiviben also returned after two-three months. Jiviben does all household chores herself even at this age. She says, “I like to cook khichadi and bhajiya.” Harkhabhai comments: “That’s because we have no teeth to eat other things.”

Jiviben is tired of life and its sufferings now. She says: “I am standing in a queue to die, but God is not paying any heed to my wish.” Harkhabhai says: “I am satiated but quite unhappy about my physical ailments.” He makes fun of the new generation saying: “Now, children are born with spectacles. We never had to wear them because we never had bad habits that would weaken our eyes.” Jiviben laughs and says: “We never used any kind of soap. We used black soil to wash clothes. I used to mix black soil with butter milk and wash my hair.” On being asked if they had any advice for youth, Harkhabhai says: “I don’t like giving advises because today’s youth don’t listen. But they should use money judiciously otherwise they will land up in huge debts. They must live in peace and harmony.” Jiviben advises: “Children should be respectful; and simple in their dress.”