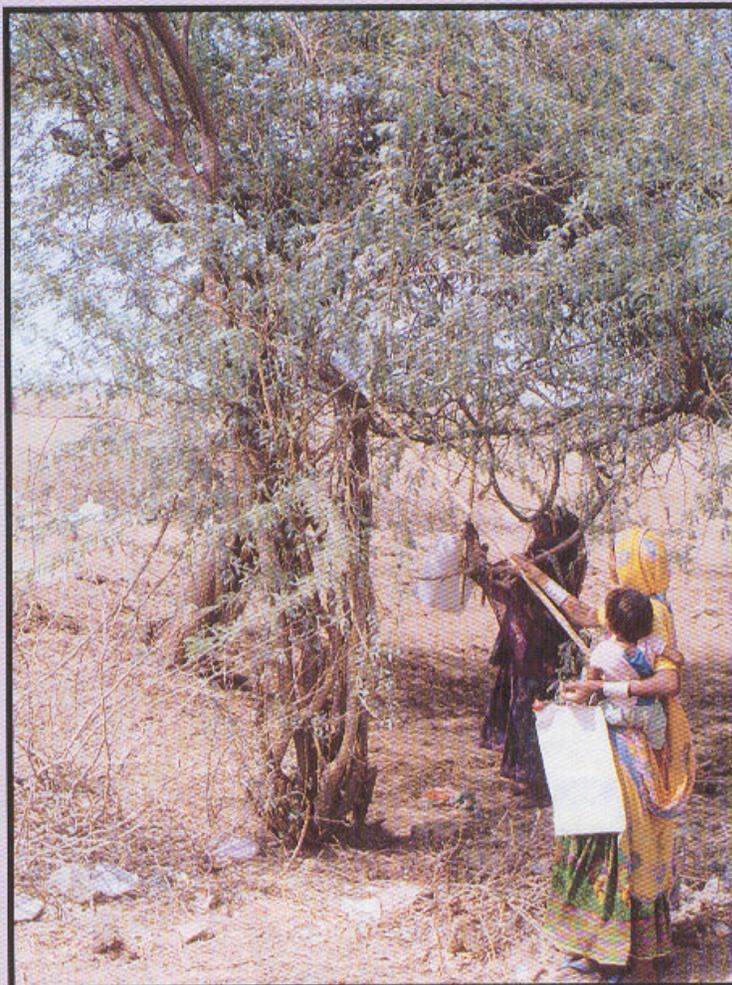


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# **The Gum Collectors : Struggling to Survive in the Dry Areas of Banaskantha**



**JUNE 2000**

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**June 2000**

## **SELF EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION**

**Sewa Reception Centre,  
Opposite Victoria Garden,  
Bhadra, Ahmedabad-380 001.  
India.**

**Telephone: (+91-79) 5506477 / 5506444 • Fax: (+91-79) 5506446**

**Website: [www.sewa.org](http://www.sewa.org) E-mail: [mail@sewa.org](mailto:mail@sewa.org)**

## **SELF EMPLOYED WOMAN'S ASSOCIATION (SEWA)**

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a Trade union of poor, self-employed women workers, registered in 1972, SEWA members earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits, like workers in the organised sector. Of the female labour force in India, more than 94% are in the unorganised sector. However work is not counted and hence remains invisible.

SEWA's main goals are to organise women workers for full employment and self reliance, through the twin strategies of struggle and development

SEWA is both an organisation and a movement. The SEWA movement is a confluence of three movements: the labour movement, the co-operative movement and the women's movement. Most importantly, SEWA is a movement that is owned and developed by self employed women so that they may become stronger, more visible and gain due recognition for their tremendous economic and social contributions to the economy and society at large.

### **SEWA ACADEMY**

The SEWA Academy was created in 1991 with the objective of providing the self employed women members of SEWA with training facilities of an international standard in order to build their capacities in the areas of skill development, education and leadership. The Academy is the focal point for co-ordinating and implementing SEWA's activities in member education, teaching, research, planning communication, advocacy and evaluation. SEWA Academy's training programs are tailor made to meet the needs of SEWA members and empower them through increased knowledge and self confidence.

## **Introduction**

This is the story of the women gum collectors of Banaskantha district, one of the driest and poorest areas of the country, in the state of Gujarat in India. SEWA began organising these women in 1990 and discovered that in spite of working under extreme climatic conditions for more than ten hours a day, they were barely able to make enough for survival. We found that the programmes and schemes framed by the Government to serve the needs of the poor failed to reach the target groups i.e. the poor themselves. This did not happen once or twice, but the same trend has been repeating year after year. In the case of the gum collecting women of Santalpur taluka in Banaskantha district, society has failed to recognize and address their needs and concerns, resulting in their daily struggle for existence. The self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) took up their cause and began organising them to be recognised and to improve their bargaining power. However, we soon ran into many barriers, the most formidable of which was the Gujarat State Forest Development Corporation, a state-sponsored organisation which controls the forests. This study, a survey of 200 women gum collectors, was undertaken to highlight the conditions under which these women live and work, and the obstacles they faced when they tried to better themselves.

## **Self Employed Women's Association**

Self Employed Women's Association is a trade union registered in 1972. It is an organization of poor, self-employed women workers. These women earn their livelihood through their own labour or small businesses. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits like women in the organized sector.. They are the unprotected labour force of our country. SEWA's main goals are to organize women workers for full employment and self-reliance. Full employment means employment whereby workers obtain work-security, incom-security, food-security and social security. Self reliance means that women

should be autonomous and self-reliant - individually and collectively, both economically and in terms of their decision

- making ability. At SEWA, the members are organized to achieve their goals of full employment and self-reliance through the strategy of struggle and development. The struggle is against the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by the society and the economy, while the development activities strengthen women's bargaining power and offer them new alternatives.

The strategy is carried out through the joint action of union and cooperatives. In India, SEWA has been organizing the gum-collecting women in 8 districts of Gujarat and MadhyaPradesh. Initially, the issues of migration and water scarcity were the major problems faced by the local people in Banaskantha district. SEWA helped these women by forming their own association at village level. Through DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) - a Government of India programme for rural development through producer's groups, based on the local resources and women's own traditional skills, women have taken the leadership to develop their own district through various economic activities. 80% of the families who once migrated in search of work and income security no longer do so. In 1996, rural women managers took over the running of their own economic activities. An individual village level DWCRA group is too isolated and vulnerable to easily reach markets, raw materials and credit on its own. SEWA has undertaken the task of promoting new groups, helping them to build their capacities and of linking them with the government. However, it was felt that there should be a self-managed organization to undertake all these functions and to act as promoter, supporter and advocate for the DWCRA groups. Thus Banaskatha DWCRA Mahila SEWA Association (BDMSA) was registered as an association. Its members are representatives of DWCRA groups in Banaskatha district. These include more than 62 village-based DWCRA groups and 135 savings and credit groups.

## **Gum and Gum Collectors**

Gum is a product procured from the trunks of babul (*Prosopis julifera*) trees in the forest area of Banaskatha district. This particular gum is used as an input into a variety of manufacturing processes in the production of certain eatables, as one ingredient of glue, in the manufacture of colours and chemicals and in the production of fire-crackers. Most of the population of 11 villages in Santalpur taluka in Gujarat, is engaged in the work of gum-collection, which is their only means of livelihood. The SEWA study team surveyed 200 women gum-collectors living in the vicinity of some 9 villages in Santalpur taluka.

Thousands of women in our country are involved in minor forest produce collection. This is their only livelihood. They care for the forests as if for one of their own, as the forests give them sustenance. In addition, many women are involved in forestry through raising nurseries, saplings and plantations. The entire Santalpur taluka in Banaskatha district is primarily a dry area, where even the water is salty. The rainfall is also meagre throughout the year. The area is full of babul trees surrounded by thorny bushes. The main occupation of the people is gum collection and their secondary occupation is salt mining. Except during the monsoon season, the gum is collected from the babul trees throughout the year. By the setting of summer, the babul turns in colour and by mid summer, the colour turns black. The best quality of gum comes when the babuls are white in colour, the next best comes when they are red in colour and the most inferior is when they are black in colour. Most of the gum-collection work is done by the Kolis, Thakur and Ahir castes of the taluka. All age-groups of people in the villages contribute towards the work of gum collection. They get up around 4 a.m. in the morning and walk 8-10 kilometres daily to the babul forests to collect gum. Gum is usually collected from the trunk portion of the babul trees.

The gum-collectors return home in the late afternoon after collecting a meagre amount of gum. They have to work for more than 12 hours a day, fighting against the blazing hot and humid weather conditions in the dry areas of the taluka. They can only survive if they are able to collect a required amount of gum on a daily basis because only by selling the gum collected, can they buy food for their family. Sometimes it also happens that while collecting gum from the trunks of babul trees they get injured by the thorny bushes surrounding the trees, which renders them helpless. They cannot go out to collect gum. In such cases, the survival of the entire family becomes almost impossible. Sometimes their wounds take a long time to heal, making them unfit to do the work of gum collection for long periods. Thus there is a reduction in the daily income of gum collectors. Moreover, these gum collectors get Rs. 5 to Rs. 6 per kg. for the gum they collect, from the local merchants, who in turn sell the same gum at the rate of Rs. 20 to Rs. 30 per kg to the shopkeepers. The same gum is then sold at the rate of Rs. 40 in the market. If we compare the margins, the gum collectors get only 1/8th of the share of the selling price of the gum, while the wholesale merchants and retailers earn much more and thus take away the major share of the cake. The condition of the gum-collector women is such, that they are not able to earn even Rs. 500 per month, so they end up living substantially below the poverty line.

### **Highlights of the Survey : 1997**

1. 92% women confirmed during the survey that gum- collection was their main occupation. Their entire family depended on the income earned from gum-collection.
2. 68% of the families earn up to Rs. 500 or less per month, whereas 25% of the families earn in the range of R. 500 - Rs. 1,000 per month. After 1991 i.e. in last 5 years, the daily income of the women gum-collectors has reduced from Rs. 25 daily to only Rs. 12 daily.

3. In 77% of the families, their children also help their parents in the work of gum-collection. Most of these children do not attend the school.
4. 38% of the respondent women have to migrate to other parts of the district in search of work, during certain months in a year.
5. 76% of the men are engaged in the work of farm-labour.
6. 68% of the respondents have already mortgaged their jewellery to money lenders.
7. 70% of the respondents have mortgaged their land and of them, 63% had to sell their land in order to pay of their debts.
8. Initially, the women gum-collectors used to get Rs. 14 per kg. for the gum supplied, which gradually started decreasing to Rs. 12, Rs. 10, Rs. 8 and finally the price reduced to only Rs. 4 per kg, whereas in the open market, the gum is sold at the rate of Rs. 40 per kg.
9. 94% women are engaged in the work of gum-collection for the last 5 - 15 years, while some 4% of them have been collecting gum for 16 - 20 years. Out of these women, almost 70% i.e. 63 women are members of SEWA for the last 4 - 6 years and 10% have become members during the last 2 to 3 years.

### **Creating Awareness about Government Policies**

The forests and the produce of the forests come under the jurisdiction of the State Government. The job of gum- collection has been given recognition by the government. The entire production of gum is the property of the government. In turn, the government has incorporated the Gujarat State Forest Development Corporation to manage and administrate the affairs of the forest areas. The State Corporation determines the price to be paid per kilogram of the gum supplied by the gum-collectors. From time to time, the State Forest Corporation issues licenses to different people in order to legalize the work of gum-collection. The

Corporation purchases the gum produce directly from the licensed gum-collectors at the price determined earlier. During the survey, SEWA organizers were surprised to learn that the poor women gum-collectors were not aware of either the existence of the State Forest Corporation or their licensing policy.

Since these women had no licenses for gum-collection, they were collecting gum illegally and selling it to the merchants in the markets. SEWA organizers had to struggle in order to organize these women gum-collectors in Banaskantha district. While organizing women and supporting them in building their own workers' organizations, SEWA identified the need for mass mobilization through campaigns. This mass mobilization strengthens the SEWA movement and at the same time highlights members' own pressing issues. All mobilization is done as part of a campaign around a clearly identified issue. The issue is identified by the women and local leaders as one which affects a large number of people or as one which is felt to be unjust or intolerable. Mobilization involves continuous meetings at the village level and these meetings must include large representation from all sections of the community.

Through their campaign with the gum collectors of Banaskantha District, SEWA got licenses for the women gum-collectors from the State Forest Development Corporation. After getting licenses, the gum-collectors started getting Rs. 14 per kg of gum instead of Rs. 6 per kg that was being paid by the merchants. In every village, a women's cooperative was established. Every month, a general meeting is called to discuss the problems and issues before these women. On Saturday, the women gum-collectors deposit the gum collected by them to the State Forest Corporation and the Corporation pays them collectively for the quantity supplied. This mechanism worked wonders with these women gum-collectors and each of them benefited from the cooperative. There was a sudden increase in their average incomes, and the women started earning more than Rs. 500 per month. Then the price per kg of gum supplied started to fall and reached Rs. 12 per kg. Later on, gradually the price came down to its

lowest level of Rs. 4 per kg. This created panic among the poor women gum-collectors as they were unable to feed their families, due to the sudden decrease in their average incomes. It became difficult to survive in these inflationary conditions and thus they had to borrow from the local moneylender in order to meet both ends. In order to overcome their struggle, the women approached SEWA and asked SEWA organisers to intervene in this matter. SEWA wrote a letter to the State Forest Minister in order to make him aware of the situation of the poor gum-collectors and followed up the matter with him. It was during a meeting with the Director of the Forest Development Corporation that the gum-collectors came to know the reason behind the gradual decrease in the price of the gum.

The wholesale merchants had imported gum from Sudan at a rate cheaper than the rate at which they used to get it from the State Forest Development Corporation. The Corporation was left to supply the entire quantity of gum to a single merchant, who reduced the price per kg to Rs. 7 only. As a result, the Corporation started paying Rs. 4 per kg to the producer gum-collectors. The gum-collectors expressed their anguish and anger against the State Forest Corporation, because they had to suffer due to mismanagement and inefficiency of the officials. Their anger was justified because the decrease in the price of the gum by these authorities not only affected their average income, but also left long term repercussions on their families, children's health and nutrition and their education.

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**Recommendations**  
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- 1) Steps should be taken to bring a change in the present policy of the State Forest Development Corporation and the women gum-collectors must be allowed to sell the gum they collect in the open market.

- 2) A scheme should be formulated by the Corporation wherein the women can be provided with chappals, hand gloves, sun cap, cutting equipment and a water bottle so that they can overcome the health hazards at the work place.
- 3) The Forest Corporation must provide a thick, customised bag to collect different qualities of gum from the trunks of babul trees. This will help the gum-collectors in earning higher incomes.

### **Situation of Gum Collectors in 1999-2000**

There is definitely some good news to rejoice over for the gum collecting women in the year 1999-2000. They started getting Rs. 10 per kg for the gum supplied to the Corporation. Previously, the women gum collectors were paid only Rs. 6 - 8 per kg for the gum they collected. The women gum collectors are also provided with equipments, which they had demanded, to ease their work. Also, the State Forest Development Corporation has given permission to sell the gum in the open markets to the women gum collectors.

The members of SEWA have been provided with the following amenities

1. Thick bags customised for collection of three different types of gum such as red gum, white gum and black gum at one time have been provided to the women gum collectors.
2. The women gum collectors have been provided with long bamboo sticks with sharp knives so that they can collect gum standing at a distance from the babuls. This prevents the workers from getting hurt from the thorny bushes near the babuls.
3. The women workers have been provided with water bottles to quench their thirst during their work. Initially, they had to travel a long distance for drinking water.

4. The current open market price of gum per kilogram is around Rs. 20 - 25.
5. An individual village level DWCRA group is too isolated and vulnerable to easily reach the markets, raw materials and access credit on their own. SEWA has undertaken the task of promoting new groups, helping them to build their capacities and of linking them with the government. However, it was felt that there should be a self-managed organization to undertake all these functions to act as a promoter, supporter and advocate for the DWCRA groups. Thus Banaskantha DWCRA Mahila SEWA Association was registered as an association. BDMSA makes the payments to the women gum collectors for the gum supplied by them.
6. The entire marketing operation is handled by SEWA Hamila Gram Haat, the marketing arm of BDMSA. Excluding the administrative and transportation expenses, the remaining earnings are remitted to BDMSA and the BDMSA pays them directly to the women gum collectors.

**Profile of Jamuben -  
a Gum Collector of Santalpur Taluka**

Jamuben lives in Patanka village of Santalpur taluka in Banaskantha district. She is 37 years old and illiterate. She is the sole adult earner as her husband is physically disabled and she has two minor daughters and a son. She has been collecting gum for the last 27 years i.e. she started working when she was only 10 years of age. Today, her daughters help her in the work of gum-collection, while her son goes to school. In the entire day, Jamuben along with her two daughters barely manages to collect 2 kg of gum for which she earns only Rs. 20. The season for gum-collection is throughout eight months of a calendar year, while during the remaining four months, her family earns their livelihood through working in the farms and embroidery work.

Jamuben gets up at 4 a.m. in the early morning to finish off her household work. She leaves for the workplace around 6 a.m. and walks for 12-15 kms. daily. She has to work in the hot conditions in the dry desert area of the village. During collecting gum from the thorny babul trees, often her fingers get mangled in the thorn bushes surrounding the tree. Physical injuries sometimes result in infections, preventing her from her work for months at a time. Many times in a year, she does not have enough food to eat or enough water to drink, leaving her to fend with whatever is available.

There is not even a single grocery shop in the village. She has to travel to adjoining villages in order to procure basic necessities. There is a chronic problem of water scarcity in her village. So her family members have to travel a minimum of 5-6 kms to fetch water for drinking. Moreover, there is no primary health centre or medical clinic to cater to the health needs of her village. No doctor is available to take care of sick persons. Jamuben is living in such conditions even today.

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