

## A report on our time with Seva Mandir, March 2013 John and Felicia Pheasant

This March, during a two-month trip to India, we spent two weeks with Seva Mandir in and around Udaipur, visiting several of their projects.

### Kotra

First stop was Kotra, some 150 km from Udaipur and one of the remotest of the rural areas in which Seva Mandir (SM) works. The scenery on the way to Kotra is breath-taking – the dry Aravalli hills with camel-back shapes surround undulating valleys of apparently barren land, dotted in March with leafless orange-flowering flame of the forest trees. In this tawny-coloured landscape, where there is some irrigation, wheat fields suddenly spring up unexpectedly. We had briefly to cross into the neighbouring state of Gujarat and it was striking to see that every isolated house there is connected to the electricity grid thanks to the prosperity of this business-oriented state – very different from poor, rural Rajasthan, and certainly tribal Kotra.



We stopped in a small village and trekked out to the middle of a field to meet a farmer who had for some time allowed his neighbours to use the water from his well to irrigate their small fields. For this privilege, they paid him the cost of the fuel used to pump the water to the surface and a third of their revenue at harvest time. But the area is undulating and the farmers could only irrigate the land that the water could reach through gravity. This meant that, for most of the year, 85% of their land could not be cultivated, irrigation being essential in this semi-arid region. In an area where 90% of the population depends on agriculture to subsist, and where average

monthly per capita income is less than Rs. 600 (less than £7.50), being unable to put so much of the land to use is crippling.

With SM's help, the well was made deeper and a pumping device installed which allows the water to reach the higher land; the lift well pump works on both electricity and diesel so it can operate even during the numerous power cuts. The farmers now no longer pay a fuel cost but give the well owner a quarter of their total production. Out of this he pays for the diesel and electricity, contributes 50% of the remainder to the village fund and uses the rest for maintenance of the well and the machinery. So now, thanks to the lift well, they can farm all of their land (more than six times as much as before).



By allowing his neighbours to use his newly mechanised lift well, this farmer, with SM's assistance, has helped the whole community to be much more prosperous. He is justifiably proud of the difference he has made to his community.

We then moved on to another village in Kotra to see a dal mill. The local farmers grow a number of crops throughout the year, mostly only for their own consumption. But lentils are one crop they can grow in sufficient quantity to sell the surplus. Being so far from the major towns, and with no access to transport, they used to have no option other than to sell to middlemen and so received a pittance for their lentils. With SM's help this village has installed a mill which refines the dried lentils to produce dal, a staple of the Indian diet.



Value has thus been added to the simple lentil crop. Moreover, as SM has staff regularly travelling to and from Kotra in cars and trucks, free transport can be provided to take the dal to Udaipur, where it is sold for a far greater return than was ever possible before. One important customer is the prestigious Taj Lake Palace Hotel. The difference to these families' incomes is enormous.

The mill is run by men, who took great delight in showing us how the machinery worked. But alongside the sacks of dal stored in the next room had gathered a number of women, members of the local Women's Resource Centre (WRC) set up by SM. Through our interpreters we were able to talk to the women and ask them questions. One senior woman was clearly a leader and spokesperson for her group. Together with her colleagues from the WRC, she has been trained by SM in family counselling. If a husband is accused of beating his wife (alas, a very frequent occurrence throughout Rajasthan, and indeed India), the couple is asked to come and meet this team of women to explain the situation. If they uphold the wife's complaint, the man is asked to promise to mend his ways. Does it work? Quite often it does, as the shame of the whole village knowing what he has done makes him want to avoid future embarrassment.

But this is not all that this team of women does. On our way to Kotra, our SM guide had explained that this tribal area has its own customs for dealing with crimes and disputes and tends not to involve the local police, who keep a low profile. Step up the formidable team from the WRC. With SM's help they have learned about the police and the court system and are able to investigate suspected crimes. They are the first port of call if there is a suspicious death. In an area where an eye for an eye or financial compensation by the perpetrator are the accepted ways of dealing with crimes up to and including murder, accusations abound, even in cases of death by natural causes, so the women play an important role in deciding when to refer a case to the authorities. In one case recently, a second wife was found to have attempted to poison her husband and his first wife. The WRC team found her guilty and made her promise not to try again. Once more, the public shame has been enough to resolve the situation.

We asked how these women felt about men having several wives and received the very firm impression that most of those present would not take kindly to this in their own households. We also asked if they brought up their sons to treat women better than is

often the case, and again understood that it would be a brave son who would mistreat a woman in the presence of these feisty mothers. We are not naïve enough to believe that all is now rosy in this village, but the empowerment of these women constitutes significant progress.



As we left, we asked the women what the greatest achievement of their WRC had been. With no hesitation the senior woman said, 'Before, no one knew who I was when I walked down the street with my veil over my face. Now they know I'm a force to be reckoned with.' With a big smile, she demonstrated to us by waving her fist in the air that she relished the status she had now achieved in her community, where everyone knew that she was indeed an empowered citizen.

After a break for lunch at the SM office for the Kotra block (administrative region), where we met the enthusiastic and hard-working team who run operations in the field, we made one further stop in another hamlet. There we inspected one of the new Ecosan toilets, hundreds of which SM has helped install throughout its work area. No need to look away now, as this is a clean, fresh, good-news story!

One needs to remember that houses in these areas have no running water, so water for drinking and washing has to be carried from a well which may be some distance away. There is certainly no sanitation and no drainage in the small houses. As toilet facilities are non-existent, the neighbouring fields are used. This is not a very satisfactory state of affairs from any point of view, but for women and girls it can be a real problem as they are particularly vulnerable to assault at these times. These Ecosan toilet units are built with two Indian-style floor-level loos side by side. The system requires liquid and solid waste to be kept separate: the liquid is filtered and then used in the fields; the section for solid waste is 'flushed' with ash, and the dry mixture is stored in a chamber below the toilet. The first loo is used until the storage chamber is full, and then this is sealed and the second unit used. By the time the second chamber is full, the solid waste in the first has turned into odourless manure, which is taken out and spread on the fields and gardens, and the loo is once again ready for use. Despite our initial misgivings at being given a guided tour of loos, these (and others we saw on our last visit) were the cleanest and sweetest smelling toilets we visited in India! The rural inhabitants who have benefited from the installation of these toilets are now very proud indeed and are keen to show them off.



Just time before we drove back to Udaipur to see, outside the house of this same proud loo-owning family, another well with pump which sends water pouring out of a pipe from which the women of the neighbourhood collect drinking water to carry home on their heads; the water then flows into a basin in which women wash clothes (and children paddle) before it flows on into the fields for irrigation. The goats have worked out where to get a refreshing drink too – so not a drop is wasted.