

*The Vand Women of Kachchh*  
By Keya Acharya

*She gazes unflinchingly with direct eyes into the camera with a feminine mystique and physique that could, be gracing the front cover of a beauty magazine. Her red, mirror-worked blouse, in the traditional Kachchhi style worn by tribal women, is strapped at the back in stringed bows, greatly practical in the dry, wilting heat of that arid expanse of land in hinterland Gujarat called Kachchh. Her skirt is a colourful hue of printed green, and her 'dupatta' is a blazing red piece of cloth swept forward from her waist, partially covering her back, brought over her head and tucked back demurely into her waist again. Her name is Ammi.*

*Ammi is the young daughter-in-law of 40 -year-old Mithiben Prabhu of Java vand I, a remote hamlet, or 'vand' (or even 'vandh') in Rapar taluk, Kachchh. Vands are especially typical of Rapar, one of Kachchh's nine taluks, formed by the lowest in the social order of caste in Gujarat, lowly Kolis and dalits. Desperate in their bid to wrest a living from the saline-ridden wasteland soils of Rapar, Kolis have traditionally moved out of their original villages literally in search of greener pastures and built hamlets called vands near these rain fed lands. Without any of the facilities of road, school or water, marginalised and impoverished, life in the vands is a daily saga of search for water and survival.*

*For women like Ammi and Mithiben, that struggle is harder than the men's, with daily chores of home, children and fields yoked together with the burden of scouring and carrying water for drinking and cooking from distances, at least 5 daily litres per family member just for drinking.*

*In the dry season and in drought that occurs cyclically every three years, when even the river bed at Muari is dry, Mithiben digs a 'veerda' or shallow in the river bed and scoops out water. "Veerda's" or shallow dug wells tap potable water trapped between the upper soil layers of (between 1-4 metres) as deeper down (<4m) one hits saline/brackish water. Digging out the sand requires effort. She needs at least 150 litres (or 15 'beras' or pots carrying 10 litres per pot) for her family and her 8 cows. "I need more than others because of my cattle", says Mithiben.*

*Ammi helps in this hard task, does the cooking and helps out with the cattle..*

*“There have been many times when we have drunk even saline water; what else to do”, says Mithiben, with stoicism.*

*But the 2-year-old Sanghavara talaab (pond) a little distance away from the cluster of hamlets that form Java vand I, used by 25 families with a population of 135, has been a godsend, even for the wild ass and nilgai that come in from the neighbouring Rann of Kachchh in the night to drink the cool waters from this pond.*

*Built with support from the Arghyam foundation, in collaboration with Ahmedabad-based Samerth Trust, the pond provides water not just for the residents of Java Vand, but also for neighbouring farmers working in their fields during the day.*

*Arghyam has supported the building of 19 such earthen check dams, and dugwells set up on river beds, for 16 vands in a 100-km radius from Gagodhar village in Rapar where Samerth Trust has a field camp.*

*And for Mithiben, Ammi and the women of Java Vand I, the pond has reduced their incredibly heavy burden of carting ‘bera-loads’ of water to what they now consider akin to a ‘walk in the park in fetching water from the pond a few metres away.*

*“I need at least 6 beras of water [at 15 litres per bera, that works out to a total of 90 litres] for my family of six”, says 60-year-old Galalben Gaba who carries this water on her head at her age even today. “Previously I took one hour, now I need just 10 minutes”, she says, relief writ large on her face.*

*Elsewhere in Mayani vand outside Bhimadevaka village in Rapar, 50-year-old Jivtiben, skin wrinkled in the harsh weather, is a member of the pani society. She decided, on her own, to join in as member when discussions about the pond were taking place between Samerth Trust and the community.*

*“The talab will help us in agriculture and I am grateful to Samerth for this, so I decided I would give ‘shramdan’ in return and join in the society”, says Jivtiben.*

*Jivtiben, who says she trod several trips each day as a young bride to Thoriyavi river 5 km away, bearing water on her head, displays a dignity and self-confidence that is admirable, especially knowing the iron-hard living situation of the women in the vands. She explains to us how members subscribe, where the money is kept and what they intend to do with the collection this year.*

*"I now have bath two or three times in a week, and if my clothes are dirty I wash!" she smiles in explanation. Jivtiben also strains her water before drinking and says government staff chlorinates the Narmada Pipeline (NPL) water trough in the village.*

*NPL facilities, built here prior to the earthquake of 2001, cracked during the 'quake. The trough and the underground sump have been leaking, and unrepaired, since then. Since NPL water is anyway very irregular, the village scoop out the water by hand buckets when it does come. But it is very obviously not a source to be either relied on for regularity or depended upon for drinking water.*

*In Meghasri vand falling under the land-area of Adesar panchyat, the women face an even harder task of not having their menfolk around, salt-pan workers near the Rann of Kachchh. The word 'takleef' (hardship, difficulty) is common in the vocabulary of the vand women.*

*"We do everything", says Amina Ben simply.*

*The men work in the pans for 9 months of the year, coming back once a week or so to deposit rations with their families and collect some dry food, like 'bajri rotis' in return to take back. Infamously exploited, the salt pan workers of Kachchh remain almost in bondage, tied down by overriding debts they incur for money to send to their families back home.*

*The Samerth Trust mobile health van visits the women of Megasri once a month, but serious health issues and emergencies pose tremendous difficulties.*

*Health and sanitation remains serious in all the vands. "Bahuth dikkat" { very difficult}, says the Rapar co-ordinator for the quasi-governmental Water Supply and Sanitation Management Organsiation (WASMO), Mr. Chandrakant Makwan, explaining WASMO's attempts at stopping open defecation among the community.*

*The positive note on this is that the women of the vands, unlike in other rural areas of India, are not bound by social norms which prevent them from going to the toilet during daylight hours because of privacy issues. Hence the negative health impact of the same is not witnessed here.*

*But the spirit of these women in the face of almost-insurmountable hardship is a fascinating feat by itself.*