

In Gujarat's Banaskantha district, life can be tough. But that hasn't stopped its people from finding ways around it.

Michael Hill's SOAR (Strengthening Opportunities and Advancement for Rural Women) program, executed in collaboration with Samhita, aims to improve the lives of Banaskantha district's women by delivering multiple interventions to them over a five-year period. Through these interventions, we're solving for challenges that are manifold—access to nutritious food, social protection schemes, affordable menstrual hygiene products, proper sanitation, and the right information on sexual and reproductive health.

Before we began serving our participants in this region, we set out to understand what life in Banaskantha is really like, and how its inhabitants negotiate with the everyday challenges that come their way. This is an account of what we learned.

Banaskantha district, situated along the banks of the Banas river on the north-east side of Gujarat, with its unassuming towns and villages, is known for many things. It ranks first in the country in milk production, the Banaskantha District Cooperative Milk Producers' Union Ltd—better known as Amul—is Asia's largest dairy cooperative. It also happens to be the largest producer of potatoes in the state.

The stunning Ambaji temple, located on the district's Girnar hill is a sight to behold and draws many worshippers and curious visitors throughout the year. Devotees believe that this temple, supposedly built as early as 8th century AD, houses the heart of Sati Devi.



Source: https://www.gujarattourism.com/north-zone/banaskantha/ambaji-temple.html

Under the benevolent gaze of the goddess, life goes on for the women of Banaskantha. They work, they take care of their families, they nurture big dreams, and take pride in their accomplishments, and always keep an eye out for the next opportunity that will better their lives just a little more. Despite Banaskantha's thriving tourism and agriculture-driven economy, these opportunities are few and far between for its women.

They're expected to make do with what they have, restricted to dream within the boundaries of their homes, and often unaware of how they can access the things that can improve their lives.



Pinkiben, a firebrand young divorcee from Jetvas village in Banaskantha, juggles all her household responsibilities by herself, without sparing much thought for the difficulties she faces and how they can be fixed. For her, and others like her, ***"it is what it is".*** Every month, Pinkiben relies on stray pieces of cloth during menstruation, sometimes even reusing the same ones multiple times. They're uncomfortable and unsanitary, but the only available choice.

"We don't use pads because we don't have the money to buy them," a young girl quipped during a focus group discussion organised by Samhita to understand the needs of the community in Danta, a small town in the Banaskantha district. Economic constraints, absence of awareness, and the lack of affordable and hygienic menstrual products near the village together push the women and girls of the district into further precarity when it comes to their reproductive health and well-being.

In fact, sanitation remains a community issue for the people of the region. Lack of toilet access, poor toilet maintenance, and inadequate water supply inside the toilet were the top three challenges faced by the residents, who would rather stick to open defecation than go through the troubles of using a toilet that doesn't work, and in some cases, requires a fee.

While the Banas river often floods during monsoons, the district remains mostly hot and dry, and farming remains heavily dependent on rain water and water from wells. But with the excessive usage of groundwater, it is becoming increasingly difficult to source it.

Through baselines surveys and field visits, Samhita observed that the duty of fetching water falls squarely on the women and girls. The Sarpanch at Palanpur mentioned, ***"Our building is right here, but we have to travel a kilometer to get water because there's nothing left in the ground."***

With constant water troubles, agricultural output gets affected too. Of the people practicing agriculture in Danta and Palanpur (two key regions in Banaskantha), 48% earn an income from it, while the rest grow enough only for their consumption, with no surplus to sell. For those who do sell, the biggest challenge is the distance to the local markets situated between 5-20 kms away from the villages.

Here too, women face a bigger disadvantage. ***"We aren't allowed to leave the house and have to stick to household chores,"*** a young woman from Palanpur chimed. Most of the women aren't able to meet monthly household expenses with the family income, and are eager to acquire some skills (such as packaging, sewing, and tailoring) which could allow them to earn from the comfort of their homes.

The effects of money being tight are evident most strongly in what the people eat. While a majority of the respondents to Samhita's baseline survey claimed to understand the importance of nutritious food and an iron-rich diet, they lacked the means for it. "For a household of four, you need at least 500 grams of vegetables at a time, but vegetables are expensive—around 30 to 40 rupees. So, instead, we mostly eat dal, rice, potatoes, and roti," a woman from Gola village explained.

The people of Banaskanth are not after revolutionary change, they just want a life that's a little easier. One where food is readily available, where fetching water doesn't take hours, and where women don't dread each menstrual cycle.

The solutions for their problems, too, don't need to be grand. For example, a simple kitchen garden initiative, supported by the Michael Hill Foundation, has led to a marked improvement in what the community eats. Nikitaben, a young woman from Pimpli village, proudly says of her kitchen garden, ***"So far, I've grown bottle gourd, ridge gourd, black eyed peas, and corn which will easily last us for months. Being able to help your parents and provide for the family is such a good feeling."***

Gayatriben's monthly stomach cramps and back ache seem to be dissipating, too. ***"I never thought twice about how I could care for myself during menstruation,"*** the resident of Gola village said. ***"But the awareness sessions organised by Hetalben have been an eye opener for me and my neighbours,"*** she adds. The sanitary pad kiosks have now made periods a less dreadful affair. ***"Ever since I started using pads, I feel like I have one less thing to worry about. I'm never going back to using cloth,"*** Gayatriben says, her voice coloured by relief.

Big life changes often start with small steps. Prosperity begins with a clean toilet, a functional well, and a plate of food. Just ask the women of Banaskantha, and they'll tell you.