Utthan envisions a society that imbibes and ensures the values of gender justice, equality, peace and happiness, in practice.
The Beginnings

Uthan’s journey began in 1981, when four women, chose Bhal, a region in the Western State of Gujarat, India, as a working ground to learn and demonstrate that change demanded the transfer of power to people, at their own locations. An intense urge to work for excluded rural communities, especially women and their empowerment, to organize around critical issues, not just around projects is what led to the founding of Uthan. The name carefully chosen for its meaning: ‘rising’.

Experiences pointed to the need for local leadership and responsibility for change. Inspired by Prof. Ravi J Matthai’s ‘Rural University’ experiment in Rajasthan’s impoverished Jawaja block, building self-reliance through self-education became the focus of interventions. A people’s movement comprising a large number of women and youth, started addressing their right to regular, safe drinking water, protecting and accessing common land to protect their livelihoods, challenging patriarchy, feudal exploitation and caste discrimination at local levels. Uthan facilitated the emergence of a community-based group known as Mahiti (or knowledge), which has been a local force since 1994.

Approach & Strategy

The winds of the world sailed through Uthan, providing the early realization that the challenge of access by the marginalized to resources, entitlements and quality of life needed to be squarely located within a struggle for justice. Inspired by Gandhian approach, our exploration has been based around interventions to address challenges of translating constitutional values in society, thus enabling society to give space for empowerment of the most marginalized (women, youth and children from Dalit, tribal, OBC, religious minorities and economically poor communities).

Promoting peaceful coexistence, ensuring human rights, gender justice and inclusive, sustainable development for positive change in the status of the marginalized thus form the core of Uthan’s approach.

Strategies which have evolved and continue to be relevant:

- Participatory situation analysis of challenges in multiple, intersectional contexts
- Awareness raising, mobilising & organising around rights to build community agency through effective socio-behavioural change communication
- Strengthening leaders & institutions – collective prioritisation & planning for value based interventions
- Demonstrating best practices, social & technical alternatives based on people’s knowledge and new innovations
- Building a body of learnings & experience from grassroots and other levels for sharing and exchange
- Policy Advocacy through networking and partnerships with multiple Govt. & non-Govt, stakeholders
- Strengthening team as a resource pool with core competencies for influence & growth
Growing & Learning

Utthan’s intense work for nearly 40 years has been the drought-prone coastal areas of Saurashtra-Amreli, Bhavnagar and Kutch districts and the poverty-stricken tribal districts of Dahod, Panchmahal, Mahisagar of south Gujarat. Continuing its quest for exploration and sharing of learning’s, Utthan’s leadership and work has extended to neighbouring districts, other States, to movements in South Asia and across the world. As of 2019, Utthan directly touches the lives of more than 9 lakh persons in six districts of Gujarat. Our indirect outreach extends to communities in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha.

Utthan is an evolving exploration in community-based, community-led change founded on a core of non-negotiable values: equity, democracy, liberty, secularism, social justice. These values link everything Utthan does, and every capacity Utthan tries to build and sustain.

The strength of Utthan has been its committed team, with a majority drawn from the local areas. We continuously strive to ensure a diverse mix of persons, especially from marginalized communities, at all levels. Team building and collective leadership is inherent to Utthan’s culture.

To visually show the direct geographic spread, could we be put in the form of 6 districts marked/highlighted in a district map of Gujarat (Kutch, Bhavnagar, Amreli, Dahod, Panchmahals, Mahisagar)
The organization has built capacity to work with a wide range of stakeholders at grassroots, State, national and international level, integrating the lessons learnt from each other. Utthan’s Thrust Areas are intrinsically linked to each other; which emerged as major issues during our journey for social justice in Gujarat.

**Gender Equity & Women’s Rights**

Initiatives within this Thrust Area strive to address existing inequalities in society by challenging kyriarchal attitudes embedded in formal and informal structures and institutions. With a focus on protecting and securing rights of women and girls, Utthan has intensively worked on the issues of Right to Safety & Security, Resource Rights (Land, Property, Forest, Credit), Right to Water, Sanitation and hygiene, Right to political participation and Access to basic entitlements. Integrating a feminist approach in all thrust areas has been critical. Through four mass based Mahila Sangathans and it issue Committees, women have brought about a change in their own lives and the communities in which they live. Awareness generation, support to survivors of violence and injustice; constant engagement and rallying with responsible actors; demonstration of sustainable alternatives has been pivotal in building women’s leadership.

**Livelihood Security**

Within this Thrust Area, efforts are focused on addressing the livelihood insecurity of the marginalised and improve their abilities to enhance their quality of life. Sustainability, equity and a people-centred approach is the common thread. Utthan has extensive experience in gender sensitive, inclusive natural resource management (protection and augmentation) & demonstration of technological and innovative alternatives through people’s institutions. It has successfully demonstrated innovations in soil, water, forest, biodiversity conservation and climate resilience like reversed watershed concept, improving productivity through salt tolerant crop species in coastal area, rain water harvesting in lined ponds, sub surface check dams, organic agriculture, conservation of local seed and food crops and lobster-prawn-crab fattening. Utthan has also tried to address the impact of policy and governance issues on people’s livelihoods through increasing engagement of panchayats, supporting creation of local institutions to protect livelihoods, enabling access and control over resources and entitlements.
Conflic Transformation towards justice and peace

Through work under this Area, Utthan has instilled within its team and work, a new meaning of efficient performance, that of building foundations of harmony. A strategy emerged of working through women and youth, and of building diversity into every initiative, so that issues of equity and justice could be understood as essential ingredients of output. Identifying common issues to bring women and youth together, promoting secular values in education and discussing notions of justice, its delivery, marginalisation due to intersectionality at community level is helping to build bridges between fractured communities and transform conflicts to a great extent.

Access to Safe Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Instituting and strengthening community-based institutions and building capacities to bring innovative solutions to water and sanitation related issues is the focus under this Thrust Area. The women from Bhal brought to Utthan’s table the glaring issues of safety and security of drinking water. It became a central means for translating into action Utthan’s vision of justice for those last in line. Soon, this became a movement and in 1990 a UN-Gol conference declared using the approach of ‘equity through developing local capacities’. Utthan along with others had been promoting the idea of decentralised, people centered water and sanitation with women’s leadership and community participation in planning, implementation and monitoring in all its interventions in this sector. Intense advocacy led to the adoption and acknowledgement of these ideas in guidelines of Swajaldrha Scheme, 2002 and in the Gujarat Jal Disha 2010. Additional experience in sanitation tailormade according to geography, ability and sustainability was gained. Utthan’s People’s Learning Centre on Watsan is currently sharing is experience with 11 organisations through training and monitoring support in Gujarat and 4 other Indian states, along with continued advocacy on the issue.
The answer to the baffling range of concerns Utthan has witnessed in its journey has been leadership, a thread that has united so many of its endeavours since its inception. Leadership efforts have helped connect the preoccupation with water and natural resources to the basic issues of rights, livelihoods and peace. An unwavering emphasis has been on systems that could deliver equity, self-reliance and a central role for women. Within this Thrust Area, there is a two-fold focus; one, of Strengthening Utthan as a learning institution and the other, Building self-reliant local institutions with the capacity to independently sustain empowerment and inclusive development processes. As an institution, Utthan has demonstrated the concept of collective leadership and proactively addressed succession and growth. It has very successfully facilitated establishment and growth of a large number of community based institutions viz. Women’s Federations, Area Resource groups on, Livelihood, Peace, Water & Sanitation, Watershed Mgmt., Youth issues, Economic Empowerment, Women’s Land rights, alternative mechanisms for Justice for violence survivors; some mixed and some comprising only women.
Our Partners

Our main partners include the priority communities we work with and their local institutions. Utthan networks and allies with more than 20 civil society entities to bring issues which impinge on people’s rights and entitlements to the table of local governance institutions, administrative bodies and policy makers.
Looking Ahead: Future plans

As Utthan looks back and looks ahead; a two-fold strategy of ‘Strengthening existing efforts and influence’ & ‘Scaling up’ has emerged, while still holding innovation, experimentation and learning as extremely relevant. Equity, in its original meaning, will remain its steady purpose, and as the anchor in all its efforts at resolving conflicts. Amartya Sen’s concept of going to scale: in viewing “Expansion of freedom, both as the primary end and as the principal means of development” lends voice to Utthan’s interests and aspirations for the future. While strengthening its internal capacities to address micro and macro concerns simultaneously, it identifies that multiple ways of sharing experience and knowledge, training and advocacy, are effective means of influencing policy.

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Board members: A diverse mix of rich experience and knowledge

Mr Ashoke Chatterjee
Ms Nafisa Barot
Ms Neelima Khetan
Mr Binoy Acharya
Dr Sudarshan Iyengar
Mr Vijay Parmar
Dr Sara Ahmed
Professor Alka Parikh
A quest for justice, dignity and hope.

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