MISSION POSSIBLE

Hundreds of individuals are silently galvanizing local communities into improving their lives. This is their story, the story of another India within the India as we know it.

A GROUP OF WOMEN IS ACCOSTED BY henchmen of the local zamindar. "Wait till your NCO bai goes. We will disrobe you publicly and ..." It's a threat that usually works in India. And even executed. Then there's the usual indignation and bleeding heart TV coverage capturing the desolate frame by depressing frame.

Not at Malshiras on the outskirts of Pune. The women heard the threats, gathered at the village square, hired a public address system and challenged the zamindar's men: "Come, we are here. What will you do that you haven't done to our mothers and sisters?" The women paused, applauded tentatively and waited for the reaction. There was none. The threats ceased.

You couldn't ask for a more powerful symbol of empowerment. How did it come to be? Says Maneesha Gupte of NGO Mums: "The women told me about the threats and I said, 'It could happen. I won't be here all the time. How you tackle it is your decision.'" Mums's strategy was: "Don't solve people's problems, just identify them. The people will solve their problems better than you would."

Sounds simple. It isn't. Which perhaps explains the clichéd image of India—outstretched hands lamenting the lack of suratari largesse 53 years after Independence. Be it an epidemic calamity or a man-made disaster, down for deaths or just taps running dry; we are used to seeing an India buckling under, unable to stand up and be counted.

But there is another India. The Other India. Found in random pockets. An India where people have shrugged off their slouch and picked up the shovel to make their villages, towns and cities better places; an India that Gandhi would have been proud of. Gupte and partner Ramesh Advani are only two of the hundreds of individuals who have taken the Mahatma's message to heart to create this Other India. Take education and unemployment. Shruthi Kalbag in Pabal, Maharashtra, has helped hundreds of dropouts be economically independent. He has proved you don't need multi-crore universities, only an understanding of what is required by the villagers. And contrary to what governments would have us believe, people are not looking for any largesse. "They didn't want anything free," says Kalbag.

It is not just the dropouts enrolling at Kalbag's Vignos Anandos who are willing to pay. Earlier this year, pockets of Gujarat remained untouched by the drought because people like Munsukh Sonvagji and Mustaf Savara of the villages that it costs little to insulate themselves against the vagaries of nature.

The failure of the government's development efforts clearly has more to do with systems and less with resources. As T. Chandrasekhar, the

Health • ANILBHAI & LATABEN DESAI
Jhagadia, Gujarat

Life as an Offering

EARLY TWO DECADES BACK, TWO YOUNG DOCTORS, Anilbhai and Lataben Desai, who had been practising in New York for almost five years, decided to return home and pitch their tents in Jhagadia town in Gujarat's Bharuch district. It was in keeping with the vow they had taken as medical students in Ahmedabad that they would serve the poor in their own country. The inspiration came from the teachings of Ramkrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda. Living up to the edge "Let Life Be An Offering", Anilbhai, 58, and Lataben, 57, have turned Jhagadia and its surrounding areas into a haven of good healthcare through their voluntary body works (Society Education Welfare Action)-Rural. The results are visible. The 40-old villages are almost cut out free when the condition affects 13 of every 1,000 people elsewhere in India. Infant mortality has come down to 42 (national average 65) from 172 in 1980 when the Desais began work in the region while the infant rate has come down from 38 to 20 per 1,000. Impressed, the state government handed over the task of running the primary healthcare centre for Jhagadia region to the Desais, perhaps the only instance of the government asking an Io to manage rural healthcare on its behalf. The Desais run the show with a staff of 122, including 13 doctors and 23 nurses besides village-level volunteers. Poor patients, mostly tribal from the 1,000-old villages in the region, throng to the 75-bed, well-equipped hospital of the centre. From as far as 50 km away. Shipping government hospital close to them, they came to Jhagadia simply because they have faith in the Desais. B.B. Swain, district collector of Bharuch, says, "They've also helped the traders in the region to get rid of their superstitions and belief in witchdoctors." It's been a journey of learning for the duo too. Says Anilbhai: "The poor and illiterate are at times better than the literate in their comprehension. And another lesson is that friendship and entrepreneurship has failed and not the people." —Oday Mahurkar