

Response to COVID 19

Alpana's experiences from Jalaramnagar, Vadodara

(Alpana Nayi has been with SAHAJ since 2006. She joined as a non-formal educator and graduated to being a Field Officer. A sincere worker, she has worked in Jalaramnagar since she joined SAHAJ. Today she has a cadre of responsible Peer Leaders and sensitized community leaders. Jalaram nagar is a basti of about 285 households comprising of a mixed community. It is located behind the Collabera Mall on Sevasi road. Majority of the residents here are daily wagers. One pocket of this basti comprises of about 30 households of tribal community. They earn their living by working as construction workers, waste pickers or as domestic help in the nearby flats. Some of them were displaced after the demolition of Chikuwadi, a slum in Alkapuri area in the late 90's. The lockdown due to COVID 19 although not a very big surprise was difficult to manage for frontline workers who were so used to rushing to support communities in times of disasters, whether they were human induced or natural. Floods nor post demolition stress stopped them from reaching the neediest. But this was a trying time when mobility to the communities was restricted. Many of us were not prepared for such situation and it took us time to get set to work. And many of us did. Alpana is one of them. She has used all her learnings and skills to mobilize support for the neediest households of Jalaramnagar. Her efforts in her own words)

Initially the lockdown period was for four days then it extended to 21 days. People were not prepared for this situation and many of them had no food or supplies with them to last so long. They are daily wagers which means they can arrange for their food only when they work for the day. It was a difficult condition. I called Kalubhai (community leader and Manish's father) and Manish (Yuva leader) on the second day of the lockdown to know about the status of the people in Jalaramnagar. They informed me that while some households in the other pocket of the basti had some stock of ration for about a week, the 30 families in the pocket where the tribals lived had no food at all. I first spoke to Manushiben and Sangeetaben about this. They said they will find out a way. I then called Shankar Bhai Prajapati who lives behind my colony. He works in one of the shops in Hathikhana, the whole sale market for grains and grocery. I told him about the condition of these families and asked whether he could help. He said he would get back to me after talking to the owner of the shop where he worked. After sometime he called me and told me that Ankitbhai, the owner is ready to help. He sent 25 Kg. of rice, 25 Kg. of wheat flour, chilli powder, turmeric powder, salt and garam masala. He also sent some material for Mujhmahuda as well when he came to know of the condition there. I spoke to the Sarpanch in Sevasi till the grains arrived. He arranged for cooked meals for these households and three other houses where elderly people without any support lived, for about three days. Archanaben had spoken to Gayatriben from VNM. Gayatriben came and interviewed some of the people in this pocket. She showed this interview on her news channel and conveyed to the viewers about the need of food for these people. I was constantly in touch with Manushiben, Rekhaben and Sangeetaben. Sangeetaben had told me to keep the grains and other stuff given by Ankitbhai in reserve and manage first with the cooked meals. I followed up with many well-wishers on the phone. Sangeetaben called up Neeta Panchal one of our ex colleagues to talk to the Corporator Rajesh Aire to supply food in Jalaramnagar as well. He was playing an active role in distribution of cooked meals and vegetables to the people in Subhanpura. Neeta followed up with him and called me and gave me his number to coordinate further with him. Neeta also conveyed that Ballu, one of the youths in

Bhesasurnagar was also distributing food to the needy. She gave me his number as well. She had already spoken to him in this context. I had to coordinate with Rajesh bhai and Ballu every morning for the next three to four days giving them the number of people needing food and the time for the food to be reached to the basti. They took turns for lunch and dinner. The flow of meals stopped for some time when the announcement for ration to BPL card holders was made and some positive cases of Corona were found in the city. I then sent the ration and the other stuff sent by Ankitbhai to Jalaramnagar. Manish and Kalubhai distributed it equally among the needy households. Regularity and quantity of cooked meals was becoming a concern with each passing day of the lockdown. Raw ration kits were a more feasible option for its users. But the stock of grocery in the local shops in the vicinity was slowly getting over. Malls were also to be closed down. Sangeeta ben called me to find out possibilities of depositing some amounts in the accounts of some Peer Leaders or community leaders. I was also asked to find out if they had cards or google pay facility to make payments easy after purchase of the material. She also asked me to ask the shopkeeper in the vicinity if he would have sufficient material for the kits and also give us an estimate of the kit. She sent me the list through WhatsApp. He promptly gave the estimate of the kit with prices for each of the content in the kit. It was about Rs. 1430/-. He also assured me that almost all the material in the list was available with him provided we arranged to purchase it in a day or two. He was not in a position to get new stock in this situation. I sent the estimate to Sangeeta ben who forwarded it to Manushi ben. Kalubhai and three other community members who had debit cards gave me their account details which I sent to Sangeeta ben. Somehow this system did not work out. I was informed that Manushiben had contacted a person called Krinaben who was preparing kits for the relief work and had almost similar items in her kit as ours. She had good contacts with the police department and would not have any problems reaching the kits to our bastis. We would be buying kits from her.

Manushiben called me on April 01, in the morning and told me that Krinaben will bring 30 kits to Jalaramnagar. She told me to coordinate with her. I called Manish and Kalubhai. They collected seven kits from Krinaben near the Collabera Mall. They brought the kits home and called me. Manushi ben had asked me to click a photo of the kit with its contents. I opened one kit, clicked the photo and sent it to Manushiben. But I felt that some of the packets looked smaller than I had assumed them to be. I called Manushiben and informed her. She asked me to weigh the contents of one kit. Kalubhai got weighing scales from one of the local shops and we weighed the wheat flour. It was three Kg and 800 gms, about one Kg and 200 grams less than it was supposed to be. The spices were also just 100 or 50 gms when the original list had 200 or 250 gms of these spices. I informed Manushiben who then communicated with Krinaben. She expressed her apologies and said that some of her volunteers who did not know the requirements must have packed the kits. She assured that remaining kits will have all the contents as mentioned. She also assured of two extra kits. We packed the kits and kept them as they were. Krina ben delivered 33 kits after two days. We returned her seven kits which she had given in the first lot. All the things in the new kits were according to the list except the spices which were still less in weight but we did not mind. The three extra kits were for Gokulnagar. Payal, one of my ex colleagues had communicated with Sangeeta ben for three kits in this basti which comprised of two families with people with disabilities and one with

three girl children. Sangeeta ben communicated to me that one of these families had already got a kit from Muavin Trust so I asked the anganwadi worker to give me the name of one neediest family. She gave me the name of a widow whose only son is with disability. Gokulnagar has 950 households and it was quite risky for me to go personally. Manish helped me with this. Payal and the anganwadi worker gave me the address of the families and I stood on the road with the kits and gave him directions to reach these households. Manish went in and gave them the kits.

Some of the BPL card holders going for ration were sent back from the PDS shops because they had not brought ration from these shops for the last six months. They were asked to get their ration cards stamped from the main office in Akota. The check posts made it impossible for them to get them stamped and thus some of them despite having cards did not get the ration. Three account holders under the Jan Dhan Yojana got Rs. 500 in their accounts. The APL card holders were also sent back. The shopkeepers told them they had not received any written letter for ration distribution for APL card holders and told them that they may get the ration after April 14, 2020 i.e. after the lockdown opens.

Gayatriben from VNM had already spread the word and arranged for cooked meals from Iskon Temple Trust. The Trust distributed cooked meals to anyone provided they picked up the food from the Trust. Kalubhai and Manish reached to collect the khichdi but they were stopped by the police on their way back near Yash Complex - Gotri. They called Gayatri ben who spoke to the police and they let them go. The rules for the lockdown were getting strict day by day. I went to distribute food to the people in Jalaramnagar in the van of Crime Branch. I was scared in the beginning but PSI K.J Vasavada saheb is quite friendly. The people waiting for food in Jalaramnagar scurried on seeing the police van. I had to get down and call them. They came out only after seeing me. It was thrilling experience for me.

Jyoti ben from AATAPI also learnt about Jalaramnagar and she called Sangeetaben and Manushi ben telling that her society is willing to provide cooked meals for the 30 households. Manushiben asked me to coordinate with her. She contributed to the cause for three days. But then the cooked meals were not allowed so she distributed 33 kits of raw ration in Jalaramnagar.

The announcement of the lockdown extended up to May 03, 2020. Meanwhile the announcements of ration distribution to families with APL cards was a relief for the APL card holders. Many of them got ration in the following five days. Many people called me or approached Kalubhai for guidance as the distribution of ration was according to the codes on the cards to be distributed on different dates. It was quite confusing.

The Peer Leaders (Jalpa and Manish) and community leaders (Kalubhai and Radhaben) from Jalaramnagar made list of people who had no cards at all. I sent it to Manushiben. They also helped the police to distribute the cooked meals which were sent through the crime branch and VNM. The food was distributed in two phases. First the van stood near the pocket where the 30 most vulnerable families lived. After distributing food to them they took the van to the other side of the slum and distributed the food to all remaining households. The Peer leaders

made sure that the men migrants from Bihar and U.P. who stayed on their own and the elderly citizens who are without support get the cooked meals.

Jyoti ben had forwarded the details of a new scheme, Anna Para Brahma Yojana, for the families who did not have any ration card. Manushiben again told me to coordinate with her. Jyotiben guided me to call the Suraksha Cell. I told this to Kalubhai who willingly called on the number. He spoke to Pathak Sir (the Judge) who in turn spoke to the Nayab Collector. The Collector ordered the Talathi to look into this matter. Dilip bhai, the Talathi saheb from Gotri visited Jalaramnagar. He met the people and also saw the list. He said he wanted adhar card number of these people as they did not have ration card. So, all these four, Jalpa, Manish, Radhaben and Kalubhai set to work again. They added the Adhar card numbers to the list and sent it to the Talathi. So far 40 families from the 59 have got the ration. We are trying for the remaining families also.