

Response to COVID 19

Shakuntala's experiences from Mujhmahuda and Hanuman Tekri - Vadodara

(Shakuntala Parmar is the Field Officer working in three slums in the Mujhmahuda pocket (Two parts of Mujhmahuda as it is a large slum and HanumanTekri). She lives in Mujhmahuda. She joined SAHAJ in 2012 as an 'Animator' and has since then developed her potential to reach out to the neediest people in these slums. She is now a 'Field Officer'. She also works as a 'Link Worker' for the Health Department, Vadodara which is an added bonus when it comes to connecting her health education with the services. She is a sincere person. The people from her basti call her 'Maasi'. Some have nicknamed her as '108' (The emergency ambulance service in Gujarat) because she is always available at a call. The lockdown period has been very challenging for dedicated frontline workers like Shakuntala who have always been with the people at the time of crisis. Managing the situation differently has been her experience for which she is happy. The narration of her experiences in her own words).

Mujhmahuda

Mujhmahuda is a large slum comprising of about 500 households with a population of about 4000. It is divided in pockets according to its community settlements like Mali Mohallah, Bhaliya Vaas, Bhangar ni Chaal, Bhairav Nagar, Yogeshwar Chowk etc. Most of the people here work as workers in GIDC or as construction workers. Men in Bhaliya Vaas and Bhairav nagar beg for a living while the women are engaged as domestic help in the nearby flats or as daily wagers.

Everything slowly started closing in Vadodara since March 22. Then a 21-day lockdown was announced in the country from March 25. It was for the safety of the people. People who had some savings or stock of provisions knew they could manage the lockdown but there were many families who were not in a position to face such a long lockdown period. Initially they managed buying the necessities from the local shopkeepers who gave them the stuff on credit but after about three days from the lockdown, the stock in these provision stores got over and the shopkeepers were forced to keep their shops closed. Some families approached me for help. So, I called Sangeeta ben, Manushi ben and Rekha Didi for the same. I told them that there was no need for raw ration immediately but some people needed cooked meals to survive. Some donors provided cooked food in Bhaliya vas. Sangeeta ben had contacted someone for cooked food. He came and talked to the people and distributed food to some families especially the households where elderly people without any support lived. But after the donors were stopped from distributing the food in the bastis due to the positive cases found in Vadodara it again was a big problem. Sangeetaben asked me to call Alpana to check whether Ankit Bhai would help with the ration. He had given some ration in Jalaramnagar. I called Alpana and she gave me his number. He agreed to give some ration but asked us to collect it from Atladra Chawk. My husband has a tempo and so we collected the material the same afternoon. Ankit bhai had given 25 Kg rice, 10 Kg dal, five pouches of oil and salt. We took the material to my sister in laws place. She stays opposite to Mujhmahuda. It was a risk to carry it to my house. Many families were eagerly waiting for food or ration supply. We had prepared the kits in the tempo. We put all the kits in her place. Then I picked five kits at a time and dropped the kits in the households who needed it the most. I had the list with me already.

Sangeeta ben spoke to me to find out if material for the 35 kits that SAHAJ was going to make for Mujhmahuda would be available in the local provision stores. I told her that all the shops were closed. I went to the Reliance Mart with Geetaben, one of our Advisory Committee Members (We have formed an Advisory Committee in each basti that we work in, which has some local people, women and men as members, who are willing to support our work in the bastis. Each Committee has about

seven to eight members) The manager there told us that there was enough stock of material we wanted but he said he would need a letter from the organization. I called Sangeeta ben and she talked to him. He told her a letter from the organization is required saying that the kits are for relief work. She then talked to Manushi ben who prepared the letter and sent it to Sangeeta ben. Sangeeta ben called me again and asked me to find out who of our Advisory Committee Members had debit cards so in case the money is transferred in their account, they can pay the bill in the mall after getting the material. Geetaben has a card. Others did not. My husband offered to pay through google pay. Sangeeta ben sent the letter to the manager and called him to check for the logistics. But he told her that after speaking to her he spoke to his Branch Manager. He told him that the material should be given in bulk. Kits will have to be made by the organization. This was because they had a lot of rush in the mall and less staff. Preparing 35 kits in the basti was not possible at all. While we were thinking of some other alternative and calling more donors to give cooked meals, I got a message from Manushiben that she had contacted Krinaben who would prepare and deliver the kits to the basti. I was relieved. Getting out of the basti was becoming very difficult. Some donors gave ration kits in Bhairav vaas and Bhaliya vaas based on their survey. There was a big fight. The people who did not get the kits were very angry. It was quite stressful. People who knew I had arranged for some kits and following up for the food supply, came to me and gave me lists of people they wanted ration for.

Rekhaben had told me to keep my list ready as Krinaben would deliver the kits made for SAHAJ in a short time. But I was very scared. Some people in Mujhmahuda are dangerous and the situation was such that everyone was looking out for help. Some people from my list had already got some ration from the other donor and some had received it through government as they had BPL cards. Some families had members whose accounts were linked to the Jan Dhan accounts and received Rs 500 for each individual account. I was confused. I called Sangeeta ben and asked her what I should do. She told me to resurvey the families I had on my list and find out if they had received any support from any of the sources and if yes, what was it. This would help me to omit the names of the people who had already received help sufficiently and add the names of the families who now needed it the most. This exercise helped me. People supported me by giving true information. I deleted three names and added three new names to my list. Some person sent by Varsha ben Mistry also approached me to do another survey. He wanted to give kits also. I told him I had a list already and he could give the kit to the people. But he said he had a form to fill and that it should be filled for every household. He would pick up the needy families according to his criteria and then go and talk to find out whether they really needed it (verify). I did not want to take the risk because the survey would raise hopes of the people and if they were rejected, they would catch hold of me. There was no sure hope from him like SAHAJ. Many people were coming and talking to people but actually doing nothing. I spoke about this to Sangeeta ben and she too agreed knowing the situation then. I told the donor that I would not be able to do the survey for him. There were some people in the basti who would do it for him. He could approach them for the same.

On April 03, Manushiben called me to pick up the kits in the evening. I picked them up at seven in the evening and took them directly to my sister in laws place. I then called the Advisory Committee Members. We had a small meeting. I showed the kits to Geetaben, Manjuben, Ramesh Bhai, Anjana ben, Ajay and Ramlal. They too warned me of the danger of taking the kits to the basti. They suggested I get phone numbers of the families on my list, call them one by one to my sister in laws place and hand over their kit to them. The distribution went on till late midnight. I received a lot of support from the Advisory Committee Members and some people in the basti. I am thankful to them. That night I could sleep in peace.

Hanuman Tekri

(Lockdown extension period II - April 15 to May 03, 2020)

When the lockdown extended from April 14 to May 30, I decided to take the risk of going to Hanuman Tekri. Ajay (Yuva Working Group member. Yuva working Group is the core group of youth Peer Leaders who are associated with the organization for a considerable period of time and have contributed to the work with their communities) had kept me informed all these days that two tempos came to the basti regularly and distributed cooked food to the people. With the lockdown extended, the number of people for cooked meals increased. Hanuman Tekri has about 180 households some of which at the extreme periphery are not visible from the entrance of the basti. Internal roads are very narrow for any big vehicle to pass. The food that came to the basti was now not enough. The people in the peripheries were left out. The food finished by the time they came to pick it up. I called Manushiben and Rekhaben who gave me Krishna bens number. I spoke to her about the situation, she asked me the number of people who were not reached. It was 200. She sent food for these people twice a day. The other donor managed with the rest of the households but still some households were left out. The food comprised of either khichdi or dal-rice. Some people told me that they had not drunk tea for all these days. It would be nice if they got some raw ration. I communicated this to Manushi ben, Sangeeta ben and Rekha Didi. Manushiben arranged for 50 kits but again the question was its distribution. I went to Hanuman Tekri with my husband and talked to some members of the Advisory Committee. They too had the same concern that if I brought the kits to the basti where would I keep them. People not receiving the kits may create problems. I told them I can keep them in the education center (SAHAJ runs 'Education Centers' to coach children from marginalized families in their regular curriculum. One of these centers is in Hanuman Tekri which SAHAJ pays rent for). I could get the keys from Kalpana ben, the Educator. They said it could be an option.

I called Kalpana ben at seven in the morning. She said I could pick up the keys from her house. I went to her house in Manjalpur at six in the morning the next day. Ajay (Peer Leader) and Anjuben (Committee Member) called me and told me that it would be risky to keep the kits in the Education Center. The condition is such that many families do not have enough to eat. There are chances of people breaking the lock of the center. I had to collect the kits the next day and I did not know where to keep them safe. I talked to Ramesh Bhai and Ramdas Bhai who live in front of my house in this context. They said they know a place where the kits could remain safe for some time. It had a CC TV camera also. The place was closer to Hanuman Tekri. I had to collect the kits from Krinaben but she did not come on the day she had told. I waited for about an hour and called Manushi ben. I was told she would come the following day. I stored the kits in the place suggested by Ramesh Bhai. I informed Ajay and Anjuben that the kits had arrived and asked help in their distribution. They promptly came with their bikes. Four people on four bikes (Ajay, Anjuben and her husband, Arjun and Sunil) I gave them the list we had prepared. They took one kit each in one round and delivered them personally to the needy households in the list. We all worked till late at night. I am thankful for the support given to me by the Peer Leaders and Committee members.