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Udaan
An Intervention for Prevention of Child Marriage in **Gujarat**

Udaan is designed to find a community-led solution to the high prevalence of child marriage in Gujarat. The purpose is to initiate a community dialogue that helps reflect and initiate change that affects the prevailing social norms around child marriage. UNICEF[1], in partnership with the Gujarat State Child Protection Society under the Social Justice and Empowerment Department, Department of Education, Government of Gujarat, and Anarde Foundation (NGO partner), carried out a pilot in 120 administrative blocks of Banaskantha district, Gujarat. The intervention was initiated with a village mapping exercise to identify barriers. Education of adolescents was chosen as the introductory intervention to pave the way for more intensive dialogue around the prevention of child marriage. The intervention resulted in communities engaging in positive dialogue, skill, and confidence building in adolescents. It also led to successful partnerships with Gujarat University, leveraging of government resources for *SABLA*[2], and the strengthening of government and implementing partner systems in the areas of adolescents' education, life skill building, and child protection.

Area of Intervention

Banaskantha

Gujarat

Map not to scale

Intervention State

Intervention District
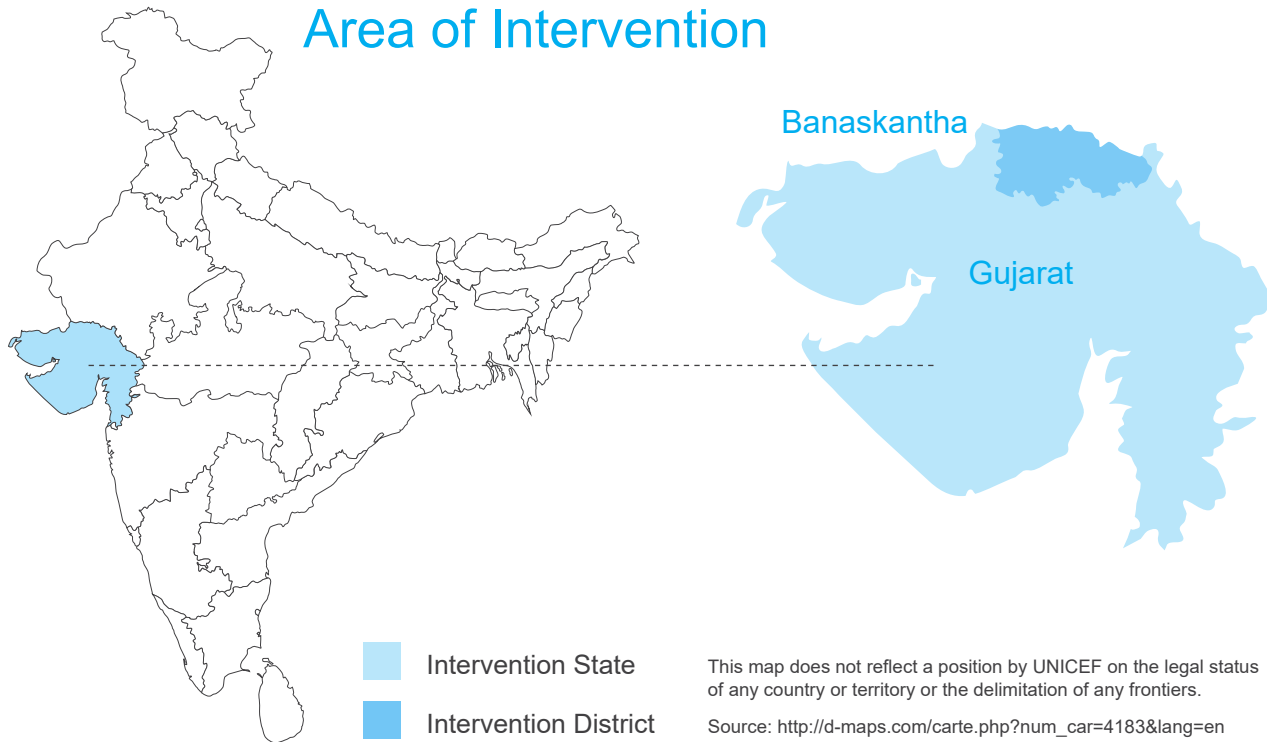
Situation

Worldwide, more than 700 million women alive today were married before the age of 18. India alone accounts for one-third of this global total[3], although only accounting for 18 percent[4] of the world population. India has had a law preventing child marriage since 1929, but implementation has proved to be a challenge. In turn, child marriage has adverse implications on health and several other aspects of life; with high infant, child, and maternal mortality rates being partly attributed to child marriage.

Instance of child marriage in Gujarat:

In Banaskantha, 56 percent of married women (aged 20-24) were married before the age of 18. This, in contrast to the Indian average of 43 percent and the Gujarat average of 35 percent[5], makes Banaskantha the district with the highest child marriage prevalence in the state[6].

Drivers for prevalence of child marriage[7]

Lack of easy access to schooling (mainly due to distance), especially at the secondary level, leads communities to encourage families to marry girls early – so the onus of protecting her and her chastity, which is equated to family honour, is transferred to the bridegroom's household. The safety and chastity of girls is a major concern for parents.
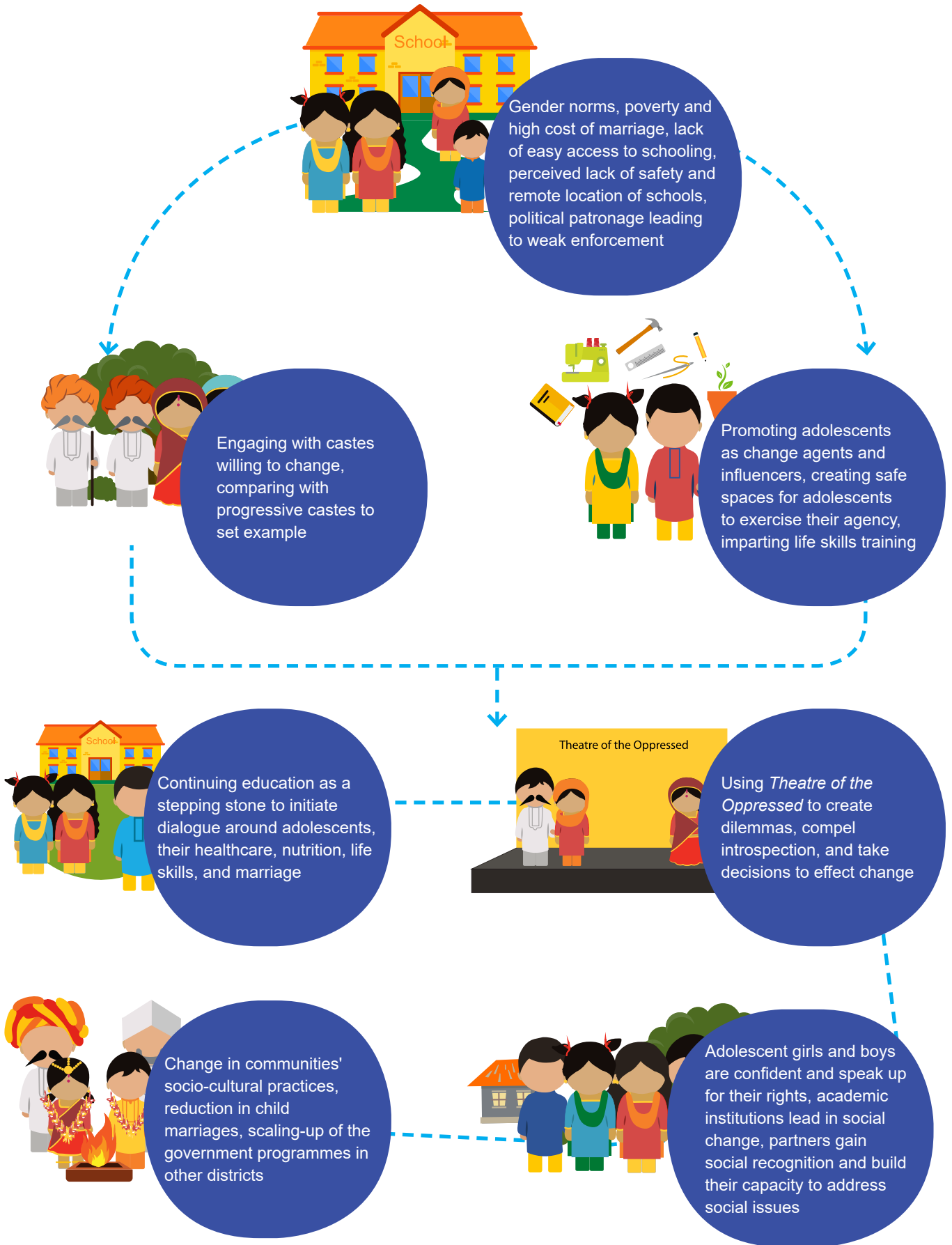
Gender norms mean girls and women have an inferior position in society. Fear of losing family honour in case of a premarital sexual relationship, and child marriage as the means to save the family from any possible dishonour is grounded in prevalent gender norms around virginity. Even the seemingly poverty-driven act of marrying off girls in lieu of debt has its roots in gender norms that privilege men in every aspect and deny any voice to girls.

Poverty, high wedding costs, and other economic considerations sometimes drive families to marry their children early. Practices such as sibling and cross marriages, or *Atta Satta* – the simultaneous marriage of one set of brother and sister to another set of brother and sister from the same village, tribe, or clan – are a result of this.

Political patronage weakens enforcement agencies. Communities with formal groups like caste *panchayats*[8] form a key voting block, and often have political connections. Enforcement agencies and Frontline Workers (FLWs) find it difficult to go against their accepted rules and norms.

Due to the above reasons, child marriage is widely practised. Socially approved sanctions for child marriage are key contributors to the trend.

Theory of Change

Gender norms, poverty and high cost of marriage, lack of easy access to schooling, perceived lack of safety and remote location of schools, political patronage leading to weak enforcement

Engaging with castes willing to change, comparing with progressive castes to set example

Promoting adolescents as change agents and influencers, creating safe spaces for adolescents to exercise their agency, imparting life skills training

Continuing education as a stepping stone to initiate dialogue around adolescents, their healthcare, nutrition, life skills, and marriage

Theatre of the Oppressed

Using *Theatre of the Oppressed* to create dilemmas, compel introspection, and take decisions to effect change

Change in communities' socio-cultural practices, reduction in child marriages, scaling-up of the government programmes in other districts

Adolescent girls and boys are confident and speak up for their rights, academic institutions lead in social change, partners gain social recognition and build their capacity to address social issues

Discussions at the Anarde outreach programme.

Method

Acknowledging child marriage and the many challenges it poses, UNICEF, in partnership with Gujarat State Child Protection Society (SCPS)[9], Department of Education, and Government of Gujarat initiated the *Udaan* Programme with a pilot in Banaskantha district. Within UNICEF, three internal departments – Education, Child Protection, and Communication for Development – converged for this intervention. The objective of the *Udaan* intervention is to bring together caste *panchayat* leaders, who influence the decisions of adolescent girls and their family members, and initiate a dialogue on the consequences of underage marriage. This is done to promote a new social practice that, in due course, could have the potential to change the prevailing social norms around child marriage.

To take this intervention to the field, UNICEF selected Anarde Foundation, a local NGO, as the implementing

partner. Anarde has had a long presence in Banaskantha with experience in water conservation, child rights, sanitation, and hygiene behaviour related interventions. Other initiatives towards the formation of women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the district also helped them engage closely with communities.

Udaan started with a caste-mapping exercise across 120 villages in Danta and Kankrej blocks of Banaskantha district. This activity involved village-level mapping of various castes and communities inhabiting the village, status of adolescents, and other key issues for the community. Village-level mapping helped to decipher the community's perceptions on education of girls, and age of marriage. It also aided the understanding of social and gender norms, and how these dictate their behaviour, caste structures, and the role of caste *panchayat* leaders.

Mapping of 19 castes was done over a period of two years and categorised into three groups:

|	
Castes that are rigid and resistant to change[10]	
Middle-order castes with a strong presence in the community, but willing to change	
Progressive castes, where change has already started	

Given that this was the pilot phase and UNICEF had little experience in engaging with the community on the sensitive subject of child marriage, a conscious descision was taken to work with the middle-order caste *panchayats*. The reasons being that these castes have:

- Significant, widespread presence in terms of geography and membership

- Organised cast structures

- Strong norms, but not staunch or rigid beliefs

- High prevalence of child marriage

Out of the eight middle-order castes identified, the *Thakor, Rabari,* **and** *Valmiki* communities were picked to kickstart the intervention. These progressive castes were the three most populous communities in the intervention

Thakor   **Rabari**   **Valmiki**
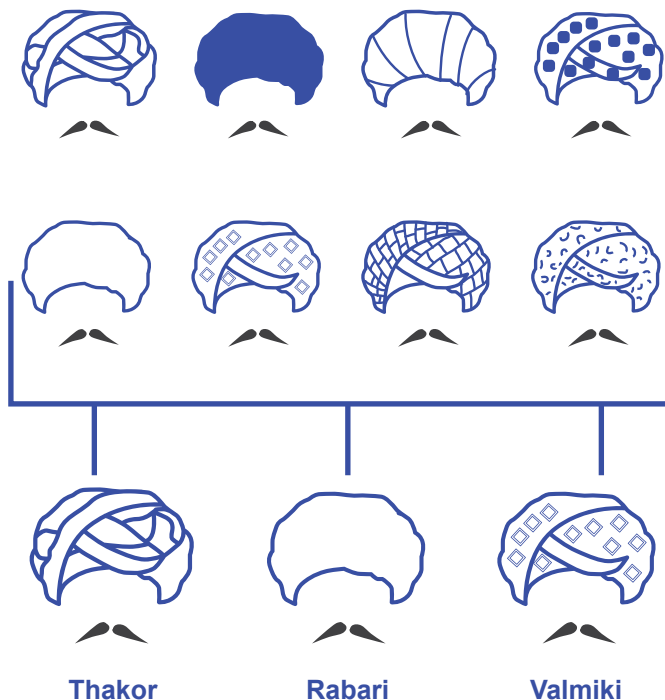
area, with the village mapping exercise highlighting a high prevalence of child marriage. They were considered to be positive influencers for the middle-order castes, as elaborated later in the document.

Parallel to the village-mapping exercise, the intervention also initiated the formation of organised groups of adolescent girls and boys in 120 villages, with the aim to provide adolescents with a platform to participate and express their opinions on issues concerning them.

Hasumati Sarvarkar is a cluster resource person with Anarde Foundation.

Action

Three key components here were:

1. **Intensive engagement with the priority castes:** Focus group discussions, one with each of the three caste *panchayats*, were conducted. These discussions aimed to enable the communities to identify the issues being faced by their adolescents and youth, posing hurdles in their development.To help them in this reflection, UNICEF also brought in members from *Prajapati* (more progressive) communities to illustrate how reforming and revising social norms has helped their communities progress. The key challenges identified were education, substance abuse, unemployment, and regressive social practices like child marriage. The initial interactions focused on establishing inter-linkages with various government schemes, to help facilitate education and employment. This included the *Saraswati Sadhna Yojana*[11] that provides bicycles to girl students, and the *SABLA*[12] scheme that supports nutrition, healthcare, and life-skills education for adolescent girls.

2. **Empowering adolescents to act as influencers:** Using the existing adolescent groups as a platform, UNICEF supported the *SABLA* Life Skills programme of the government. UNICEF aimed to strenghten the *SABLA* components with specific reference to life skills. Through this, the government and UNICEF sought to:

   • Empower adolescent girls and boys

   • Create an enabling environment at the community level by sensitising parents and community functionaries

   • Strengthen government service delivery and child protection mechanisms at various levels

   • Create safe spaces to ask questions and express concerns

Tejalben Dushuruthbh got a cycle under the *Saraswati Sadhana Yojana*, prompting her parents to continue her education.

Aashaben is a volunteer with Anarde, under the *Udaan* project.

This programme component follows UNICEF's framework of rights, means, and activities for adolescent empowerment. The child helpline number,1098, was popularised to help register anonymous complaints related to the abuse of their rights. A suggestion box was introduced where adolescent girls and boys could drop their complaints and queries, which would later be shared with the Village Child Protection Committee (VCPC)[13] for resolution.

3. **Communication around child marriage:**
    After having initiated work on education and life skills, the next step was to bring together the caste *panchayats*, senior leaders, women, and adolescents together and trigger communication around child marriage. A tool was needed that would strategically unfold self-realisation and open conversations around the sensitive topic of child marriage. *'Theatre of the Oppressed'*[14] (TOO) was introduced as the communication tool, and UNICEF conducted a five-day capacity building workshop to train team members of Anarde Foundation, Gujarat State Child Protection Society, and District Child Protection Unit (DCPU).

The issue-based performances were typically 15 minutes long. Actors from within the adolescent group would build up a scene – such as the imminent marriage of an adolescent girl – and then stop at a critical point in the story. They would then invite audience participation and questions, followed by a discussion on the right thing to do and how to do it. The scale-up programme plans to include mothers and fathers of adolescents as key influencers, along with caste or *panchayat*[15] leaders in the child marriage prevention initiative, and make them change bearers of the process.

Partnership for Change

UNICEF partnered with Gujarat University to involve young college students in awareness campaigns around education and child marriage. This was carried out in March 2017, in collaboration with the Child Protection and Education department in Banaskantha district in 300 villages – with the involvement of 450 students from nine colleges in the district. It is a key example of how resources can be mobilised and partnerships can be built with universities to generate momentum for the initiative.

Alkhaji Hajurji Thakor is the caste leader of the *Thakor* community.

Results

The capacity- building investment in adolescents has resulted in them becoming more confident and speaking up for their rights[16]. Caste leaders from *Thakor Samaj*[17] acknowledged this change and felt that their children could share their newly learnt knowledge with other children. As a community, they felt that they have now become more cohesive and have started to reflect on the factors that deter their communities' progress. They now work together to identify the ways and means to overcome them.

The intervention also showcased a successful partnership with universities, to leverage resources for social causes.

Rameshbhai, the founder of Anarde Foundation, reported that:

• There is an improved confidence in Anarde's staff and delivery of their role because of this intervention

• The intervention has improved the social capital in the district for Anarde and opened the social space for them to work and contribute to their society

Dr Swarup Rawat, District Child Protection Officer, Banaskantha, stated that the department received 95 complaints of child marriage immediately after a 10-day awareness campaign conducted in March 2017. According to him, the communities now recognise the child protection unit and look up to it for help and support on issues related to child rights, child abuse, exploitation, and violence against children. Additionally, the state government also recognises the key contribution of UNICEF's Life Skills component and has decided to replicate this in other districts where *Kishori Shakti Yojana*[18] (KSY) is being implemented. Further, as part of *SABLA*, $248,000 (INR 1,61,27,787) in government funds were leveraged in the programme implementation plan to enhance social and behaviour change and the life skills component in the nine *SABLA* districts.

This intervention has also seen a sectoral convergence for UNICEF, where it has been able to bring together the Education and Social Justice departments to work towards one cause.

Transformative Change

UNICEF's intervention has caused the communities to reflect and initiate the process of revising opinions on mass marriage, more specifically on child marriage. The *Thakor* community has revised its community rule-book to include a bylaw that prohibits child marriage amongst their caste members. This signals a significant movement forward that would help achieve the long- term objective of prevention of child marriage.

The results from this intervention have been acknowledged by the state and district-level child protection departments. In Banaskantha district, the Child Protection Department has already initiated the process to form a Village Child Protection Committee (VCPC) in all its 1,255 villages[19]. This transformation maps back to C4D's output indicator which aims to strengthen the state government to implement, monitor, and evaluate the programmes with social and behaviour change at its core. Taking the learning from the *Udaan* pilot in Danta and Kankrej, UNICEF, along with the support of DSJE, is now scaling the project to other blocks and eventually other districts.
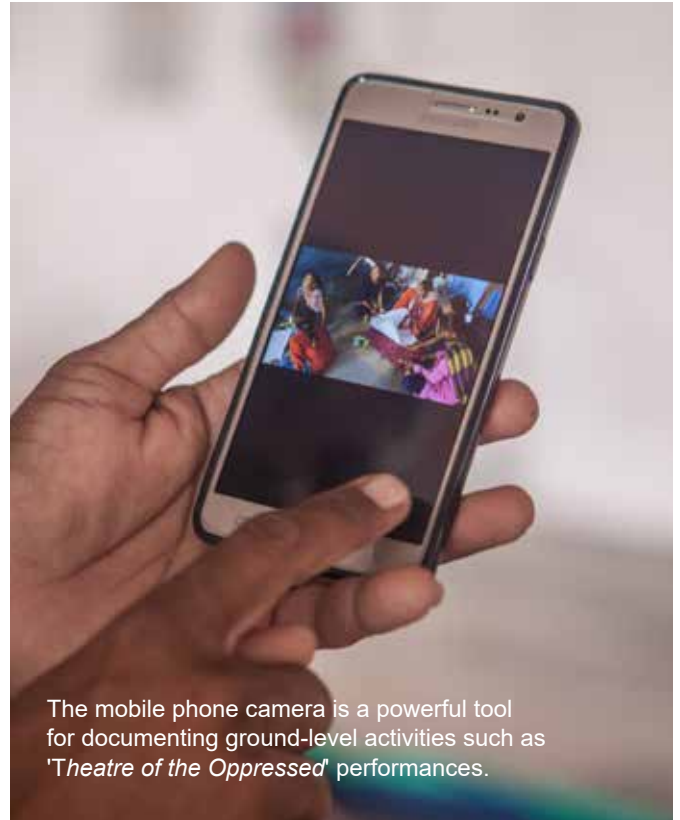
The mobile phone camera is a powerful tool for documenting ground-level activities such as 'T*heatre of the Oppressed*' performances.

Caselet

The first time Chetna Viraji Thakor's parents considered getting her married was in 2014. She was just 13 years old then. Studying further meant travelling around 6km to the nearest school in Tundia. Chetna's parents did not think it would be safe for her to travel to the school alone and on foot.

Kanubhai Prajapathi, the cluster resource person for Anarde Foundation in Danta block of Banaskantha, counselled Chetna's parents. He helped get a cycle for Chetna under the government's *Saraswati Sadhana Yojana*, resulting in the prospect of her marriage being averted for the next two years.

The second time Chetna's parents considered her marriage, she was 15 years old. She had, by then, joined her village adolescent girls' group. Thanks to the training by UNICEF and Anarde Foundation, she was more aware of the problems associated with early marriage. She called upon the group for help, and all 14 girls from the group came over to her house to talk her parents out of the idea of marriage. Chetna is now 17, and working towards a career in computers; happily unmarried.

In Summary

In 2013, UNICEF launched its *Udaan* pilot initiative for prevention of child marriage in partnership with Gujarat State Child Protection Society, Department of Education, Government of Gujarat, and Anarde Foundation. Here is a roadmap of the initiative rolled out in 120 villages across the Banaskantha district.

Action

A network of cluster resource persons and village volunteers is developed to conduct on-ground interventions.
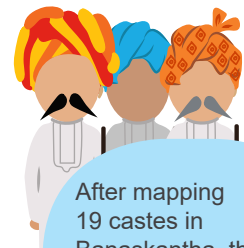
After mapping 19 castes in Banaskantha, three – *Thakor, Valmiki*, and *Rabari* – are selected for the intervention.

Theatre Of The Oppressed

Communication with communities and adolescents on a common platform to help them reflect on challenges faced by them is initiated.

Groups for adolescent girls and boys are formed for life skill training. Gender sensitisation workshops are conducted for the groups as well.
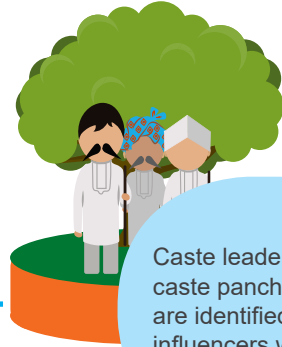
Caste leaders of caste panchayats are identified as key influencers within the community.

Theatre of the Oppressed is organised across villages of these three communities.

Results

Adolescent girls and boys are more confident and are able to speak up in public forums.

There is increased awareness about child protection within societies in the targeted districts.

Communities now reflect on practices such as child marriage, and their harmful effects on children and their community.

Successful demonstration of partnerships with universities have leveraged resources for social causes.
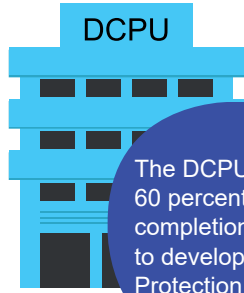
Transformative Change

Communities are in the process of revising norms on mass marriage and more specifically, child marriage.

Government departments have been strengthened to implement and monitor such crucial and sensitive interventions.
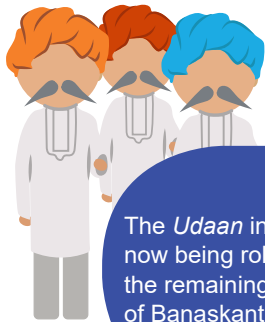
Current Scenario

DCPU

The DCPU has achieved 60 percent (1,255) completion of the task to develop Village Child Protection Committees.

Mothers of adolescents have been made key influencers in decisions regarding early marriage.

The *Udaan* initiative is now being rolled out in the remaining blocks of Banaskantha.

Upscaling includes plans to involve fathers of adolescents into the conversation as well.

References

[1] Within UNICEF C4D, 3 thematic teams are working together for this intervention; education, child protection, and communication for development

[2] *SABLA* is Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls. It is an integrated package of services and includes nutrition provision, IFA tablet provision, health check-up and referral services, nutrition and health education, counseling and guidance on family welfare, life skill education, and vocational training for girls aged 16 and above.

[3] United Nations Children's Fund, Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects, UNICEF, New York, 2014

[4] http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/india-population/

[5] District Level Household Survey-3 (2007-2008)

[6] According to the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-2016)

[7] United Nations Children's Fund, Reducing Child Marriage in India: A model to scale up results, UNICEF, New Delhi, 2015

[8] Caste *panchayats* are caste-specific juries of elders of a particular caste for a village or a higher level in India.

[9] SCPS is formed under the Social Justice and Empowerment Department (SJED)

[10] UNICEF has decided that it will work with all the rigid caste members as well in the future after having built its experience from the pilot in Banaskantha

[11] SSY can be availed by any Indian girl belonging to scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, or other backward caste communities.

[12] *SABLA* is Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls. It is an integrated package of services and includes nutrition provision, IFA tablet provision, health check-up, and referral services, nutrition and health education, counseling and guidance on family welfare, life skill education, and vocational training for girls aged 16 and above.

[13] VCPC is formed as part of the Integrated Child Protection Scheme of Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare. The objective is to have committees that can address child rights and protection related issues at the village level itself.

[14] 'T*heatre of the Oppressed*' (TOO) is a communication tool, developed by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, to encourage discussion about different forms of oppression within society.

[15] *Panchayat* is a smallest geographic administrative unit in India. It acts as a local self-government organization.

[16] This is anecdotal and based on inputs from UNICEF's education and C4D team.

[17] As shared in an interactive discussion with the caste *panchayat* leaders.

[18] The broad objectives of KSY is to improve the nutritional, health, and development status of adolescent girls.

[19] As told by Dr Swarup Rawat, DCPO, Banaskantha during an interaction as part of the study for documenting this case study

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