

Lahanubhai Tople

Carpenter

Tutarkhed village, Dharampur block, Valsad district, Gujarat state

Lahanubhai Tople, 40, is a simple farmer hailing from Tutarkhed, a remote tribal hilltop village situated 3 hours away from Valsad town in south Gujarat. A small-scale carpenter by profession, Lahanubhai's irregular and meager income proved insufficient to sustain his family of five. He routinely migrated to Dharampur or Valsad for four to five months a year, leaving his wife and 3 young children behind. Lahanubhai detested the travails of migrating - the unfamiliar environment, the uncomfortable adjustments, the distance from his family and most of all the exploited feeling. The lack of a sense of belonging that came with being a migrant worker, left him dispirited.



A few members of the carpentry group



Lahanubhai displays wooden beehive frames made by the group



Cutting wood into specific dimensions using a cutting machine

By 2012, UTMT's operations had expanded and the demand for beehives outweighed their supplier's capability to deliver. The need to start in-house production of beehives was felt. UTMT staff began scouting for skilled carpenters in the project villages, and in the process met Lahanubhai. He asked umpteen questions, trying to understand the work it would entail and prospects for growth. He saw it as a risky proposition at first – beginning manufacture of a new, niche product. Using inputs from the UTMT staff, he mapped the costs and potential profits per box and found it worthwhile. Lahanubhai travelled to Kolhapur, Maharashtra for a month long carpentry workshop under the tutelage of a popular beehive maker. Once acquainted with the process and specifications, Lahanubhai felt more confident of his capabilities. He made 10 beehives on a trial basis, using the feedback from staff to refine his technique. Orders began to

flow in, and Lahanubhai no longer felt the need to migrate for work, even going on to hire two apprentices from the village.



(L) Wooden frames in the unit; (R) Finished beehives stored indoors

Today, two and a half years and 500 beehives later, Lahanubhai smiles as he recalls his journey from part time migrant labourer, part-time carpenter to full time resident village carpenter manning a unit of 9 workers. He feels proud that the beehives he makes stand on farms in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. He speaks of the labour and time intensive phase in early 2013, when he cut wood with an axe and polished it with a hand machine. Realizing operations would be more efficient with a cutting machine, he purchased one with a Rs. 40,000 loan from a shopkeeper and a UTMT staff member. With the comfortable 20%-30% profit earned on each beehive, he made enough to repay the loan after just 50 beehives. Lahanubhai continues to dream big: he hopes for a stable electricity connection that will help him produce upto 100 beehives a month, a big jump from the current 60-70.

With the steady stream of income, Lahanubhai has rebuilt his humble mud house into a brick-cement house and ensured his children continue their education. He is proud that his eldest daughter, who was to discontinue schooling due to untimely fee payments, has appeared for the state Higher Secondary Examinations. In addition, healthcare is another major spend. “Earlier, I had to regularly borrow money when I fell ill. Now, I do need to borrow!”

“UTMT changed my life... It’s like they were God-sent. I had never seen so much money before...Earlier, I used to be worried about where my next meal would come from. Today, amounts as huge as Rs. 1 lakh get deposited as advances in my account!”

More than anything else, Lahanubhai values the respect he gets from the community and the self-confidence he has developed. He enjoys his work and knows that he does it well. Associating with UTMT has given his life new direction. He has money, satisfaction, pride and more than that, a deeper intangible joy.