

# Engaging communities IN LEARNING FOR EQUALITY

While studying development management at LSE, **Gautam Patel**'s interest in ground-level change was propelled by Professor Stuart Corbridge's course on how people engage as individuals and communities with the government, in rural India. He went on to work for the governments of Rajasthan and Gujarat before establishing the not-for-profit Sajeevta Foundation in Gujarat to engage underprivileged communities actively in learning for equality.



**B**efore joining LSE I was working for the UK government on school education reform in Oxfordshire, combining this with evenings as a youth worker in a deprived inner city area. Just before I began studies at LSE I spent the summer with an education initiative working in urban slums and with rural communities in India. The stark difference between the two countries was immediate, in their history of systems, practices and interactions of governance and in particular in the life experiences of poor people.

Through the Development Management course at LSE we explored how particular institutions and organisations impact development, and how incentives and sanctions shape behaviour. Professor Stuart Corbridge introduced us to studying the outcomes of social development initiatives through understanding the relations of rural Indian communities. My own dissertation took me to rural West Bengal to observe directly people's experience of participating in governance. By the end of the course I was committed to working on how poor people can interact effectively in the community, with service providers and with the government to change their lives. I wanted to contribute new thinking and practice to the development sector.

The complexities that allow (and often disallow) the poor to transform their social and economic situation have continued to be a focus through my professional life. After working with the governments of Rajasthan and Gujarat it became clearer to me that being in poverty is not due to a failure of effort, or a failure of services. Instead there are deeper historical and cultural factors in which are embedded a mix of agendas, some of which succeed in forcing people to remain in poverty. What I find most exciting are the ways to work with communities and individuals to change how they relate to the world. With these emerging thoughts, three years ago we established the not-for-profit Sajeevta Foundation in Gujarat to explore how to engage underprivileged children and communities effectively in learning for equality that enables them to transform their lives.

The Sajeevta Foundation has been demonstrating, through ground-level action and research, that contextualised learning and improved teaching practices can transform the attitudes of children, families and teachers. Our aim is to support underprivileged children to become independent learners, helping them make a success of life.

Initially we found that the children did not have the concentration or motivation to read for more than two minutes or to write out their own story. Proper discussions were impossible because the children were used to competing against each other with conflict.

So we began by regularly working in collaboration with the family, school and wider community. We set up mentoring learning journeys for children, with individual case-files, so that the children could be guided through their studies and record their experiences. We built in individualised learning for each child to enhance their understanding of key subjects. And we helped the children look to the future, giving them the opportunity to envisage their future and prepare them for more long-term goals, whether in further education, training or employment.

Learning involves joy, challenges, failures, perseverance and courage. There is a complex mix of learning habits that every child will need in order to succeed in a variety of subject and skill areas. Learning "how to learn well" is all the more important when the children are from families without experience of learning habits and routines essential for school and higher education. The underlying principle is a shift of ownership of the learning to the child. The Sajeevta Foundation works directly with children and adults and offers workshops and training to share our best practices to transform the way that a community engages with learning, and to build up the abilities in children to be highly effective learners. ■



**Gautam Patel** (MSc Development Management 2007) is a co-founder of the Sajeevta Foundation, working for equality in learning for underprivileged children in Gujarat. For more information, please see [www.facebook.com/sajeevta](https://www.facebook.com/sajeevta) or email [gautam.sajeevta@gmail.com](mailto:gautam.sajeevta@gmail.com)