

# India Property Rights Project: Empowering Hundreds of Thousands of Farmers

by Ken Schoolland

*Through a faculty development grant, Ken Schoolland, Director of the Entrepreneurship Center and Associate Professor of Economics at Hawaii Pacific University, presented a talk on migration and economic development at the Asia Centre for Enterprise conference in New Delhi, India, this January 2014.*

*Immediately following the conference, Schoolland traveled by train to Gujarat with organizers of the Property Rights Project, which is currently transforming the lives of 182,000 farms through the use of hand held GPS devices which help villagers identify and record land titles (which did not previously exist for traditional tribal farming). These devices are used to plot coordinates on satellite maps at roughly \$1 per farm, thus enabling tribal villagers to secure their crops, homes, and livestock.*

*Over the past seven years, incomes have risen so dramatically for farmers that they no longer live on the edge of desperate poverty, but are now able to sell surplus food, to build brick homes, and to send both their boys and girls to school. With new skills in language, engineering, and nursing, returning children are bringing radical change to their villages.*

A property rights revolution is taking root in Gujarat, India, that is spreading across rural India, securing land title for hundreds of thousands of farmers. The evidence of success is so strong that this movement is expected to spread to 900 million plots of land in India and millions more across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

## **BUILDING THE FOUNDATION**

On a Sunday morning in January 2014, three hundred farmers came from miles around Sagai village in the western Indian state of Gujarat. Most of them left their homes at 6:30 AM walking, riding busses, and sharing rides on jeeps to gather in time for the noon meeting of the Action Research in Community Health & Development (ARCH) center based in Gujarat.

Farmers returned questionnaires to help calculate their needs for solar powered irrigation systems: How deep is the well? How high is the elevation? How distant is the field? What kinds of crops are grown? Previously, without title to their lands, such planning and investment would have been unthinkable. But land titles have been secured in recent years by the ARCH team: Trupti Parekh, Ambrish Mehta, and Rajesh Mishra.

Before ARCH, these farm families had been desperately poor and terribly abused. Life was at the lowest imaginable state of existence. Control of their lands had been taken by the British colonial administration for a nature preserve and, with Indian independence, authority was transferred to a national Forest Department. Centuries of traditional land use was swept aside by government officials.

“The people lived in squalor. They hovered around fires in the bitter cold of winter for lack of clothing, blankets, and shelter. They scrounged for roots to eat. Their huts were straw and demolished at

the whim of Forestry officials,” explained Trupti on our four-hour journey over rudimentary mountain roads to Sagai from ARCH headquarters in Baroda.”

“These people were constantly beaten by Forestry officials and the local police,” she continued. “They had no rights to use the land or the woods: no bamboo, no teak, no crops, no wildlife. They were treated as encroachers on their own land. Forestry officials would fine them, force them to do labor for the government, wreck their homes and fields, seize their livestock. They were treated as subhuman.”

## **INSTIGATION**

Trupti (a lawyer), Ambrish (a science graduate) and Rajesh, came to the region soon after completing their university studies, with reformer zeal, inspired by the writings of the late Jayprakash Narain. In the late 1970s, Narain admonished educated youth of the day to work at developing rural India. So these scholars gravitated to the ARCH health clinic founded by Anil Patel and his wife, both British-educated physicians, who were dedicated to rural service.

Their passion for the poor today is as strong as ever, but their ideals have changed radically in favor of property rights for farmers. They took the time to investigate what the farmers, themselves, wanted and needed.

Informed that the official in charge was away, Trupti declared that the official

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Barun Mitra, Trupti Parekh, Amrish Mehta, with villagers

must reply by wireless before 4PM or it would be assumed there was no legal authority. The deadline passed and, with forestry subordinates afraid to resist the crowd, the buffalos were restored to their owners.

A few days later, Trupti and three of the villagers were arrested for robbery of public property and disturbing public order. A conviction could have meant up to 10 years imprisonment. After one night in jail, the authorities released them and Trupti began a spate of legal action against the forestry officials. The court sided completely with Trupti and the villagers, acquitting them and declaring that the forestry officials had no case at all.

ARCH was key to a national awareness campaign for survival and dignity. The mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people across India underscored the importance of forest dwelling communities to political leaders in the country. This set in motion passage of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 (FRA), studiously constructed with input by the villagers, ARCH, and other organizations. The FRA gave families the right to own land that

they tilled as of December 2005 and the right to use non-timber forest resources.

The first step of implementing the FRA was to insure a rule of law and the security of villagers from arbitrary action by the authorities. Labor and product could no longer be confiscated without legal resistance. Even in planning a road, the authorities had to obtain prior approval of the village assembly, Gram Sabha. The village assembly was empowered to assess claims of the families and communities, to map and document rights, and to forward findings to the authorities for a final decision.

The next step was to establish proof of the land title. Amrish's technical skills established a simple and sound method of surveying with hand held GPS devices, plotting coordinates on satellite maps by Google Earth. In the past six years they have trained village leaders to use the GPS and document land claims in 250 villages.

Barun Mitra's Liberty Institute has joined the effort, lending support in the provision of GPS plotting devices, building the Right to Property web platform for processing information and

generating reports. The website [www.righttoproperty.org](http://www.righttoproperty.org) was put up by Ken Schoolland, Director of Development for the International Society for Individual Liberty (ISIL). Together, ARCH and Liberty Institute have conducted training sessions in different states over the past couple years. The expense of this operation has come in at roughly \$1 per title.

In the preliminary stage of certifying these titles, forestry officials have attempted to deny many claims and to reduce the acreage allocated by as much as 80%. Undeterred, ARCH is successfully reinstating the claims, with the support of satellite images. In a recent case, ARCH and a few local people successfully persuaded the High Court in Gujarat to order the government to review all 130,000 claims which had been rejected.

## TRANSFORMATION

What has all of this meant to the villagers? It has transformed their lives. There is no food shortage now and government subsidies are no longer necessary to prevent widespread starvation. They have adequate food production, they are sell-





*Google satellite map and hand held GPS device*

ing surpluses to other regions, and their incomes have risen dramatically. Food security at home has meant that homes are now able to send family members to work outside the village to earn cash income.

The villagers now have title to their land. Even though the FRA does not allow them to sell the land to people outside their community, they are secure in protecting their investment with fencing to protect against wildlife, with lofts to protect against water damage and rodents, and with brick double-wall construction (so much better than straw) to protect family and livestock against severe heat and cold of the seasons. With title, the law protects them from forced labor and the confiscation of produce and livestock.

They can now protect their bamboo stands from officials and marauders from distant villages. Insuring against a tragedy of the commons, green (young and premature) bamboo can be allowed to grow three or more years to a substantial size that earns a good price as construction material. Leaves from various forest plants are now protected so that they can

earn cash for such articles as cigar wrappers, serving plates, and roofing materials. Incomes have risen dramatically and have been invested in farm equipment, seeds, fertilizers—and education.

Twenty years before only a handful of children in the whole village area went to school. Even for those who could go to a government school, it didn't seem worthwhile since teachers often only showed up a few times a month to collect a salary. The future was bleak, indeed, for kids in such remote villages.

Now all families send their male and female children to school. Most go to private schools because the government schools aren't trusted to teach the kids properly. They might pay 10,000 rupees (\$160) a year for education in local language. Some others prefer to spend as much as 14,000 rupees (\$230) a year, for education in English. A growing number of families can now also afford to send their children for higher education in quality private schools in more distant locales, seeking professional courses such as nursing or computer literacy, spending as much as 100,000 rupees (\$1,600)

a year.

Education brings dramatic change to the income potential of a farming family. Many of them get the skills to earn a much better living and return income to the family. One family reported that their daughter studied to be a nurse and plans to come back to live and serve in their village. Not only does education help them to learn more about farming, but educated kids can now help their families in negotiations with buyers and sellers in the markets instead of relying on others. When there are health problems, they don't have to hire outsiders to explain symptoms, diagnoses, and remedies. They even have enough income to pay one of their own to teach the littlest kids the basics of arithmetic and writing.

One farmer, Aarsi, informed the meeting that his father had been electrocuted by a broken power line. Previously, such an incident would have been dismissed by the authorities as unimportant. Now there is every reason to believe that they can legally seek compensation and accountability from the state electricity authority.

At the recent meeting in January,

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Trupti asked the people gathered, “Do the authorities treat you any differently now?” There was a widespread rumble of agreement. “When we go to their office now,” said one, “they ask us to sit with them, and they offer us water.”

Barun explained, “The offering of water is a normal sign of respect among equals. They were never treated as equals before. There has been a sea change in attitudes—not only among the authorities,

but among these rural people as well.”

#### **For more information, please contact**

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#### **Websites:**

<http://www.InDefenceofLiberty.org>  
<http://www.EmpoweringIndia.org>

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## Which Mobile Device Should I Choose?

*by Han Nee Chong Wester, Ed.D.*



Last Saturday, I attended a workshop, “Mobile Mo-Bettah”, presented by Rachel Inake and Brent Hirata at the Hawaii Business Educator Association’s (HBEA) State Conference at the Leeward Community College. Rachel and Brent are both educational technologists at Leeward Community College and shared with us some useful tips on how to choose a mobile device that is right for you.

Here are some questions to get you started:

- 1) Do you prefer a device that is more like a laptop, or one that is more like a smartphone?
- 2) Are you predominantly an Apple user or a Microsoft user? (iPhone or Android?)

3) What would you like to use your new mobile device for?

4) How much are you willing to spend on your new mobile device?

With so many choices in the market, it can be overwhelming to choose one that fits your needs. Rachel and Brent compiled five popular mobile devices that are in the market and summarized their key features, pros and cons:

#### **Surface Pro 2**

The Surface Pro 2 is a tablet that functions most like a lap top. It comes with a keyboard, and you can install software such as MS Office on it. It operates on Window 8, and is great for those of us who are reliant on MS Office and will be using our tablets frequently to work on documents. The prices range from \$899 - \$1799. It is a bit steep but you are paying for a fully functional laptop, in the form of a tablet. [Click here for more.](#)

#### **Chromebook (Samsung)**

The Chromebook looks like a lap top, but works primarily through the Chrome

Internet browser with Chrome apps. It is cheap (the Samsung Chrome book is priced around \$249) and great for those who are heavy Google apps users. However, it has only 16GB capacity and you will have to save most of your work either on the cloud (Google drive) or in an external hard drive via the USB output. [Click here for more.](#)

#### **iPad Air**

The iPad is probably the most popular tablet in the market right now. If you are an iPhone user or invested in Apple products, you will probably like the iPad the most. It has a long battery life (10 hours), and you can download a wide app selection on iTunes. The iPad Air also has Retina display (high quality display) and a good camera (5 MP). Prices range from \$499 - \$799. [Click here for more.](#)

#### **Nexus 7**

If you are an Android user, you will find the Nexus 7 tablet easy to use, as it functions like a bigger smartphone, but without the calling plan. You can down-

