



From her spacious, one-bedroom apartment in a brand new housing block, Geetaben Thakore can take stock of her new life. The ground below was once a tightly packed slum that she called home. Like all slums in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad, Abhuji Na Chhapra had sheltered the working poor: shopkeepers, chauffeurs and domestic workers like Thakore. While cleaning the roomy bungalows of her well-off neighbors, she would often wonder if she would ever get a proper house herself.

Thakore's cramped, one-room home in the 55-family slum had no windows, a metal sheet roof and a single ceiling fan that was the sole reprieve from the blazing sun. For years, she and the other families trekked daily to the tap on the road for water, and waited in line for a toilet shared with half of the slum's residents. But with few resources and little knowledge of the workings of bureaucracy, the slight, sari-clad woman had no choice but to quietly keep on.

"My son used to tell me we would have a proper house one day. It was his dream," says Thakore. "I never imagined that could really happen."

How it happened for the whole community – and Thakore's surprising leadership role – is a remarkable story that says a lot, not just about housing in Indian cities, but the role that women can play in what remains a male-dominated society.

In Ahmedabad, the city where Gandhi established his first ashram and now the economic capital of Gujarat, life in a slum can be gruelling. Temperatures soar to nearly 50C in summer. Ventilation in the narrow lanes is a challenge. In Abhuji Na Chhapra, the men would often sleep outside to escape the hot, crowded rooms.



Geetaben Thakore in her new apartment. Photograph: Carlin Carr

Ahmedabad's slum population is the second largest in the state. Although there has been some progress in reducing those numbers across Gujarat – a success that few other states can flaunt – the issue persists. But in 2010, a new national "slum-free India" policy was announced, Rajiv Awas Yojana. This policy, unlike previous approaches to slums, encouraged in situ redevelopment – rehousing slum dwellers in the same spot, rather than displacing them to the outskirts of the city. It was an important step in recognizing the economic connections that informal workers forge in their communities.

The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) responded: it set out a plan to put this "in situ" redevelopment into practice, through a public-private partnership. The idea was that builders would provide free apartment blocks to the slum dwellers. In exchange, the city would give the contractors any leftover land, which they could use to build expensive apartments for sale on the open market. The city also increased the "buildable area" allowances, meaning taller, denser buildings – a very lucrative incentive for developers to get involved in housing for the poor.

A similar plan in Mumbai, however, had stumbled when slum dwellers grew skeptical of the developers' intentions. Years of attacks and forcible evictions throughout the city had them fearing the worst: being left with absolutely nothing. According to one report, they "were reluctant to give possession of their plots in [the] absence of alternative accommodation, as they feared losing possession of their sites permanently".



Some nearby slum dwellers are now asking Thakore for advice on redevelopment Photograph: Alamy

So in Ahmedabad, the authorities reached out to the slum dwellers first, which is where Thakore enters the story. She had already gained a surprising, if informal, leadership status in her community a few years earlier, when she helped Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT), a respected housing NGO, to implement major infrastructure upgrades in the slum: toilets, running water, drainage, paved roads, street lights and solid waste management.

“She stood out,” says Bijal Brambhatt, director of MHT. “She asked many questions, and would pacify the others who didn’t have trust in the programme.”

MHT looks for women who are natural leaders in communities, and then develops their skills on housing issues and rights. Those leaders, in turn, help MHT to form women’s groups in the slums, who then bargain collectively – dealing with everything from electricity companies and water providers to municipal and district officials.

Thakore had joined MHT’s group of women leaders, called Vikasini (Woman as a Developer), and rose through the ranks to board member. She attended workshops, learning the intricacies of housing policies and land law. MHT brought the Vikasini leaders into municipal buildings, showing them exactly what forms they might need, how to fill them out, what offices were important – and crucially, how to talk with confidence to authorities. The new skills paid off. When the slum-free programme came to Thakore’s area in 2010, offering to rehouse the entire community in a new building that they would own themselves as a cooperative, she was ready.



The new four-storey Shantadeep housing Co-operative. Photograph: Carlin Carr for the Guardian

She gathered the 11 women who, under her leadership, had already made vast improvements to the slum, and asked them to stand with her on what could be one of the most important fights of their lives. They agreed, and together they took the proposal to the community. Who was in?

Thirty families said yes on the spot, happy to know that their new co-op apartment building would go up on the same spot as their old homes. Twenty-five families, however, were holdouts. Thakore needed more – the AMC redevelopment required 75% of residents to agree. But no one knew what would happen if more than 75% approved but a few people still objected. Would the AMC simply build around those families? Or just bulldoze their homes?

Thakore was about to find out. After two long years of paperwork and neighbourhood meetings, she had eventually convinced nearly everyone of the plan's benefits, but a handful of families still refused to let go of their houses. "The slum dwellers perceived SRS [slum rehabilitation scheme] either as a novel eviction strategy of the government, or an opportunity for the developer to usurp the land on which they were presently located," said one report on the redevelopment.



A slum on banks of Sabarmati River. Photograph: Alamy

The holdouts went to court to block it; they would file 12 court cases in total. Among the holdouts, however, rumours began to spread that Thakore was hand-in-hand with the builder; that she, too, stood to make money off the demolition. As the bulldozers readied to raze the remaining homes, a small group of women protested, saying they'd commit suicide if necessary. Hundreds of riot police stood guard.

"I felt like I was doing a good job – doing something good for the community," says Thakore. "But they just weren't agreeing."

"We were worried about her," adds Brambhatt. "She's strong, but this was a lot of pressure."

The legal battle stretched into 2014. In April, the court returned its final decision: the redevelopment would proceed. The protesting families reluctantly left their homes.

A month later, the frame of the new structure towered over the old slum. Even those who had opposed it were anxious to see what was to come.

At last, in November 2014, the four-storey cooperative housing society, *Shantadeep* (Lamp of Peace), was inaugurated in a colourful festival. Thakore could finally breathe a sigh of relief. She and her neighbours finally had a building with all the amenities of a life she had only seen in the bungalows she cleaned. There is running water, lots of natural light, enough space that half the family doesn't have to sleep outside, and a roof that doesn't leak.

The tenants all have titles to their new apartments, and nearly all are in the names of the women. Emboldened by this new security, many of the families have invested in home improvements – the kind of risk that slum dwellers who don't have deeds are often unwilling to take.

Most importantly, the building represents the power of women in community-led upgrading, and their ability to earn the respect not only of their families but of authority figures and officials.

Thakore, meanwhile, feels vindicated. As the head of the building society, her phone rings incessantly with demands and questions on everything from energy bills to groundskeeping. She fits it all in among her own work cleaning homes, maintaining her apartment and managing her family. Shortly after moving into *Shantadeep*, her husband fell ill and hasn't been able to drive his autorickshaw for months. She is now the sole earner.

Recently, she got a call from another slum nearby: would she help with their own redevelopment?

Sometimes, she thinks back to the days when she would never have dreamed of speaking up in public.

"I didn't know I was so strong," she says. "After I joined MHT, I learned I can do it. And I will do it."