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## **Wankute: of People, Partnerships and Perseverance**

**J**anuary 15, 2011 was an unusual day for Wankute. To begin with, they were dealing with a city-like traffic situation. Their streets were more used to cycles, motorcycles and the occasional tractor, but today cars were lined up in every available open space. The white lines along the roads indicated an imminent arrival of an eminent person. The village kitchen was buzzing with activity; preparations were being made to feed a 1000 people. The colourful pandal flapped in the chilly January breeze, but you could barely hear its cheerful flutter over that loud speaker playing music that would eventually carry Watershed Voices across the hills and valleys of the Western Ghats.

Today Wankute was celebrating. It was one of the few villages that had received an award - the JSW-TOI Earth Care Awards, an acknowledgement of all the hard work that had gone into making it a example of community led mitigation and adaptation to Climate Change. It was a happy day for WOTR too, as along with the village, WOTR was being commended and recognized for the 5 long years of committed and focused effort. Wankute had also received the Nirmal Gram Puraskar for Sanitation, an award acknowledging the cleanliness in this village, free from open defecation and overflowing sewage. But, Wankute was not always so.



## The Village

Wankute, settled at the foothills of the Sahyadri in Western Maharashtra, was, like many of the villages around, teetering on the edge of disaster – riddled with poverty and rife with politics. The landscape stretched black and thorny – black basalt rock that heated up in raging summers, and the few cacti that managed to survive them. Sitting on the top of the hills in a rain-shadow region, it was water starved. All the rain that fell rushed out into the valleys. 3 months in a year, water tankers lumbered up the hill to distribute water to Wankute and the neighbouring villages. The rest of the year, the women trudged long distances to fetch water and firewood for the family, while the men went off to the nearby towns in search of work and wage, leaving families behind. With just 5 hectares of land under perennial irrigation and 20 hectares under seasonal irrigation, and just over 150 hectares that completely depended on rain, there was just not enough food produced to support the families.

## Did Wankute have a future?

### It did.

In 2003, the villagers, having heard about watershed development projects transforming poor, brown, barren villages like theirs into rich, green, fertile places, were interested to find out if it might help them. After visiting these sites and seeing the transformation first hand, Wankute decided that this was what they needed for themselves.

But the transformation of Wankute from parched to lush was not about to happen overnight. It came with its own share of challenges and difficulties. With WOTR acting as a catalyst and enabling partner, the Jai Malhar Village Watershed Committee (a 25 member team, including 5 women) and the Forest Protection Committee (a 14 member team, including 3 women) worked together to find solutions for their water woes and all the challenges that came with it.



## Building the Foundation

The two committees spent the first two years in training, visiting neighbouring villages to learn from their watershed experiences and setting up village meetings, workshops and gatherings to educate their fellow villagers about watershed development and mobilize them to come together as a united community, working towards a single goal – making Wankute greener, richer, healthier.

Treatment Undertaken	Area covered (ha/no)
<b>Area Treatments</b>	
Continuous Contour	620
Grasslands with Trees	92.5
Hortipasture	12.7
<b>Drainage Line Treatments</b>	
Check dam	8
Repair of Check dam	2
Repair of Nala Bund	3
Earthen Gully Plug	53
Farm Pond	1
Graded Bund	6

The greatest challenge they faced was trying to unite a village that had been so used to being divided on the basis of caste, class and gender. In addition, villagers found it difficult to stomach the ban on tree felling and free grazing of cattle, which they depended on for firewood and fodder, respectively. The ban was required for the regeneration of trees, grasses, and biomass and a non-negotiable requirement of WOTR's Watershed Development approach. So although WOTR and the committees were not surprised by the scepticism and reluctance of many villagers to participate and comply with the rules, they had to work very hard to overcome the initial roadblocks to progress. Eventually, the sceptics and those reluctant to participate were won over by the constant demonstrations of the benefits of the ban and persistent persuasion by WOTR and committee members.

Together, through measured monetary contributions and volunteering unskilled labour approximating to Rs. 540,000, the villagers began to own the project, coming together and building a series of technical land and water treatment structures like farm bunds, contour bunds, check dams, etc using only locally available materials.

In addition, 142 women, through their participation in Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Samyukta Mahila Samitees (SMSs), took up various projects to reduce drudgery, increase their income and improve the quality of their lives. The village came up with a united vision of the future and then prioritized, implemented and monitored all the activities at the pace best suited to their needs. Over time, the future they envisioned became the reality that they are living today.



## Wankute of Today



Wankute, today, is visibly different from what it was 7 years ago. The hill sides and wastelands, once rocky and cacti ridden, are now covered with 110,000 trees and grasses, reducing soil erosion and increasing ground water levels.



Then



Now

Now Wankute also enjoys sufficient water all year round, no longer having to depend on tankers for three months in a year. With this assurance of water supply, agricultural employment increased from just 3 months a year to 8 months in a year. So, while previously upto 60% of villagers were migrating out of Wankute in search of jobs, now Wankute not only has enough jobs for their own residents, but has to *import* labour from other villages to help in their farms. In addition, with the benefits of vermin-composting and manure projects by the women's groups, the farmers who used to grow bajra and pulses, now have expanded their crops to grow wheat, tomato, onions, potato and groundnuts. Even fodder, previously available just 6 months in a year, was now available all year round, satisfying domestic needs and leaving enough surplus for sale. The cows enjoy a regular and generous supply a fodder, rewarding their

owners with an increased milk supply.

Pulling together, as they did, Wankute villagers, shared the fruits of their new found prosperity with the village. They are now able to meet at their new community hall, send their children to the new *anganwadi* and high school, or visit the Public Health Centres when they are ill or need to be immunized. With the drinking water and drainage line projects, families have access to potable water, vastly lowering their chances of catching severe, and often fatal water borne diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery, and cholera. The villagers built 150 new individual latrines, when previously they had none, giving women especially much needed privacy, and of course, being a much cleaner and healthier alternative to open defecation.



In their private life, the average family at Wankute no longer needs to worry about having to send their young sons and daughters to the nearest town in search of work. They sit together watching the 130 television screens, cheering together when India won the World Cup, sighing over the latest heart break on a Marathi soap, and arguing over what channel to watch. The new roads of Wankute is seeing more traffic now, with 100 cycles and 70 motorcycles now plying the streets.

Wankute also boasts a new agro-met station – a weather reading station that tells them the daily, real time reading of the weather. This is part of their climate change initiative where they plan to plan and manage their crops keeping in mind the weather patterns.



## Samyukta Mahila Samitees



A part from the watershed project uniting a community over a common vision for the future, one of the most important social outcomes of this project has been the involvement of women and the contributions they have made to make their own lives simpler and better.

Activities of Self Help Groups	Unit Nos.
Vermi Compost	35
Sprinklers	37
Agricultural Equipment	103
Hot Water Chulla	32
Solar Lamp (Home Unit)	160

142 Wankute women participated in 9 self help groups, saving nearly Rs 300,000 in 2007. Through these organizations, the women were trained on issues concerning women's health, growth monitoring of their children, nutrition using local resources, personality development, and legal and entitlement literacy. But beyond just training, the women took their futures in their own hands. With the ban on felling trees for fuel, the women purchased solar lamps, hot water chulhas and smokeless chulhas to reduce their dependence of wood as a source of fuel.

They set up a beauty parlour and provided sewing machine training to 14 women, giving many alternative means to make an incomes. The women played an integral part in the roll out of watershed project and today are viewed and heard with greater respect by their fellow-villagers.

With the new solar lights installed in the homes, the women now can avoid the sheer drudgery of bringing kerosene for their lamps. Says Rohini Hande, *"Before the solar lights, I used to be harassed by the kerosene lamps. I had to walk 7-8 kilometres to bring the kerosene from the outlet. Sometimes, I had to make 2 or 3 trips as there was no way of knowing whether the shop would have the kerosene. But now with the solar lights, I have forgotten all about the kerosene issues in the last 2-3 years."*

## Watershed Development Impacts in Wankute

Indicators	Pre-watershed	Post-watershed	Percentage change
<b>Water availability</b>			
No of wells	42	82	(+) 95 %
Avg. Depth of water table below ground level	1.5	3 m.	(+) 100 %
Electric motors	25	72	(+) 188 %
<b>Agriculture &amp; Livestock</b>			
Main crops	Bajra, Ground nut, pulses	Bajra, wheat, bengal gram, tomato, potato, onion, groundnut.	Significant change
Kitchen garden	-	6	New initiatives
Cross breed cows	79	195	(+) 147 %
Ind. Cows	155	93	(-) 40 %
Milk Production	300 lit/day	800 lit/day	(+) 167 %
Poultry	-	5	New initiatives
<b>Assets</b>			
Gas Cylinder	-	80	New initiatives
Motor cycles	9	30	(+) 234 %
Television	20	100	(+) 400 %
Tractor	-	1	New investments
Jeep and goods carrier jeep	-	2 jeep and 3 goods carrier jeeps	
Tempo	-	1	
Kirana Shop	2	4	(+) 100 %

## Looking to the Future

Wankute's future was all tied into this increasingly scarce resource: water. Despite all the initial reluctance, scepticism and even a fear of giving up the old way of doing things, a united Wankute not just implemented a successful watershed development project, but also proved that progress need not always come at the cost of the environment. Over the four years, the project, although ostensibly focused on improving Wankute's water supply, brought the village a new lease on life. Visitors from neighbouring areas come and marvel at their achievements, and learn to believe that this can be their story to. Even without the much deserved recognition they received through the Earth Awards, Wankute is a winner.



WOTR is a support/resources organization having partnership with over 180 NGOs across the country in the field of watershed development and related areas. So far, WOTR has supported and directly implemented 1,097 watershed development projects, covering over 658,588 hectares and impacting 910,959 people. It has also trained 292,578 people from 24 states in India and 34 countries.

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 Email- info@wotr.org. website: www.wotr.org

Designed by: Viji Paul



If undelivered, please return to:  
**Watershed Organisation Trust**  
 'The Forum', S.No. 63/2B, Padmavati Corner,  
 Pune Satara Road, Parvati, Pune 411009  
 Tel.: +91-20-24226211