HOW COMMUNITIES IN THIS DROUGHT PRONE REGION IN MAHARASHTRA CAME TOGETHER TO SOLVE THEIR WATER WOES

The remarkable story of transformation of rural lives in Jalna district of Maharashtra, India
75 year old Bhimsingh Ramdhan Reknot has lived his life surviving droughts. “Aap keh sakte ho ki sookhe ke saath hi bada hua hun. Ismein bohat kuch khoya bhi hai (I have grown up in/with droughts. I have also lost a lot because of them,” he says, seated on a charpoy, in his backyard.

A farmer from Pasodi village in Jalna, a semi-arid area in Maharashtra prone to droughts, Bhimsingh has seen it all - water scarcity, crop failure, starvation and bankruptcy. He was in his twenties when the state experienced one of its worst droughts in the seventies, that left his family almost bankrupt. While Bhimsingh remembers that time with a certain shudder, he says things became much worse later.

“The drought of the seventies was different from the ones we experienced in the 2000’s. In the seventies, there was shortage of foodgrains, but never of drinking water. Drinking water was still available within six meters.

In the subsequent decade, as farmers used motors and dug borewells to access groundwater for irrigation, even borewells went dry. “Zameen mein paani hi nahi bacha (No water remained in the ground),” he says.

This kind of water scarcity, caused by recurring drought and unregulated extraction, was detrimental to hard rock regions like Jalna, because the ground cannot absorb or hold much water, and rainfall is highly uneven and erratic. Susceptible to high runoff and soil erosion, climate change exacerbated the problem further in the last few years.

Between 2012 and 2016, the region suffered five years of consecutive droughts, which made agriculture unviable, especially for small and marginal farmers. In 2016, shortage of water had become so acute in Jalna that there were nearly 4000 tankers supplying water to the rural parts of the district. Frequent droughts combined with poor cultivation practices also meant that the local habitat had become fragile and degraded.

Like many other parts of Jalna, this impacted everything in Pasodi. Wells dried up. Farms became dry. Women had to walk kilometers to fetch water. Children were forced to drop out of school. The village was forced to spend on private tankers for water supply that was both expensive and not enough. Farmers were forced to take out loans to just survive. Families were forced to migrate in search of work..
Fights over water were frequent, as was alcoholism amongst men. "Because there was no agricultural work in the village, men would loiter around drunk. Bohat ladai jhagde hote the (There was a lot of fighting)," says Bhimsingh.

This is no longer the case. Today, Pasodi has enough water to grow two cycles of crops. No private water tankers are needed in the village, and only a few educated young men emigrate in search of jobs. Farmers no longer need to borrow money. In addition to practicing agriculture, 190 of the 290 families in the village are engaged in dairy production. The village produces nearly 7000 liters of milk daily.

"Rs 15-30 lakh comes into the village every day through milk production alone. We have 3 milk collection centers, and the highest output in terms of milk in our taluka. Pehle gaon mein sharaab behti thi, ab doodh behta hai (Earlier, alcohol flowed through the village, now, its milk)," Chander Singh Tatu, the village sarpanch, says.

Bhimsingh’s family has seen their annual agricultural income rise from a mere Rs 1,10,000 in 2000-01 to Rs 17,00,000 in this time. He has purchased a tractor and installed drip irrigation on his 15 acre farm. "We were the first family in the village to get into ginger production. And are now thinking of getting into fruit production as well," he says.

This transformation - witnessed in Pasodi, and scores of villages in Jalna - is not sudden. It happened over the course of five years, from 2014-2019, when WOTR (The Watershed Organisation Trust), supported by Hindustan Unilever Foundation and the Maharashtra government, implemented the PPCP project (Public-Private-Civil Partnership) in 75 villages of Jalna district.

Combining science with social-cooperation, village communities were empowered during this time to do integrated watershed development work on their lands, through MGNREGA funds, to tackle the issue of water scarcity. Community-led watershed work along with guidance on pursuing sustainable agriculture, water budgeting, biodiversity conservation and inclusive village governance to residents, has not only ensured improvement in water levels and land productivity in these parts, but also brought lasting change.
Change, however, didn’t come easy.

For example, in Pasodi, where farmlands are located on both hilly terrain, known as ridges, and low lying regions, called valleys, little farming happened in ridge areas, as most water would flow away as runoff. The ridges, therefore, suffered from depleted groundwater and soil erosion. In the catchment areas, or valleys, water levels were extremely low, making agriculture unviable.

Rejuvenating land and water resources required taking a holistic ridge-to-valley approach, building structures like bunds and contour trenches in ridge areas to allow for rainwater to collect long enough to increase local groundwater levels before excess water drained towards the valleys.

In valleys, farm ponds as well as check dams, stop dams and earthen dams needed to be constructed to harvest water in multiple locations, and prevent soil erosion from farms, and help increase agricultural productivity. In order to repair, strengthen, and increase the capacity of existing water bodies in the village, nala, wells and small rivers would have to be deepened and desilted.

Doing this required getting village communities interested and invested - something that took over a year. To begin, discussions were organized in the village and the need for a ridge-to-valley approach was explained to everyone. Village leaders identified from within the community were then taken on exposure meetings to neighboring villages where they saw the impact of watershed work firsthand.

“We were not willing to believe what they were saying. But when we went to Darewadi (where WOTR has a training center), we saw what they were talking about. Phir jo neeyat mein badlav hua gaon mein, wahi sabse bada badlav tha (Then, when our intention changed, that was the biggest change),” says Chander Singh.

From 2016-2018, the village took up watershed development work on war footing, putting in more than 30,000 man days of MNREGA work worth Rs 73,96,750. Nearly 600 hectares of compartment bunding was carried out in the upper ridges. 15 farm ponds, 4 check dams and 5 earthen dams were built. Extensive nala deepening work was carried out.

‘Zameen ke upar bhi kaam kia, aur andar bhi. Kuch time mein, jo paani rukta nai tha, rukna shuru ho gaya (We worked on the ground, and also inside it. In some time, water that didn’t stay on the farmland, started staying),” says Chander Singh.

Keeping the geography, hydrology and terrain in mind, similar watershed work was carried out by residents in the 75 villages falling under the project, based on the particular needs of their villages. For example, in Sonkheda, a village of 130 households located mostly in the valley area, the focus of the work was the deepening of a 5 and a half kilometer nala that ran through...
the village and benefited nearly 100 households. In addition to nala deepening, check dams were made, and compartment bunding of fields undertaken.

“Every household contributed Rs 30,000 for nala deepening work, and Rs 10,000 for work on the check dam. Because a part of the work has happened from our own money, so we also make sure now to ensure that the structures stay maintained. Earlier, a lot of work used to happen for free, so no one really cared what happened afterwards,” says Sakharam Kakade, a resident of Sonkheda.

In Borgaon, another village in the area, the presence of Dhaamna, a seasonal river on one side of the village meant that the irrigation needs of farmers whose farms were near the river were met, while the far side of the village remained dry and fallow. Here, the strategy involved undertaking extensive nala deepening work on the dry and fallow side, and construction of check dams. Compartment bunding was done on 80 percent of the agricultural area. “People used to steal water from each other’s wells here. It happened to me on so many mornings. In the night, my well would have water. In the morning, it would be all gone. We would get up, and discover someone stole all the water in the night,” says Yashwant Rao Chavan, a village elder, in Borgaon.

In Adha, referred to by locals as the last village of Marathwada, the existence of rocky hills, interspersed with forests, and fallow land, required construction of bunds and trenches in the upper ridges, and farm ponds, and nala deepening in the valley area.

Between 2015-19, 22 farm ponds, 3 earthen dams, and 4 check dams were constructed in Adha. “80 percent of village land is now irrigated in Adha, compared to just 20 percent when the programme began,” says Gajanand Kale, the village sarpanch.
Livelihood Security Brings Income and Prosperity

As entire families undertook watershed work in their villages and on their farms, receiving a monthly income through MGNREGA, a useful option of livelihood was generated. This income was especially beneficial for villagers who had little to no land.

Parvati Kakade, 45, a farmer from Borgaon, is a case in point. Since childhood, Parvati remembers working as a manual labourer on other people’s farms, first with her father and then with her husband, earning Rs 50-100. “Haathon se bhi kuen khode hain (We used to dig wells with our hands),” Parvati says. The pay was always less, and the work sporadic.

When her family of three took up MNREGA work in 2014, they owned just 1 acre of land. From the income the family earned through watershed work, they slowly purchased more land - an acre each in 2016, 2017 and 2019. In 2020, they invested in the installation of a pipeline system, to connect their well to the farmland. In 2021, they installed drip irrigation on their 4 acre field, and purchased two oxen for plowing the field.

Last year, Parvati and her family were finally able to achieve their dream of owning a ‘pukka’ home. “There was always this sense of wanting to do something more from the beginning, but I didn’t know what. There was never any opportunity. With this work, we found that opportunity. We worked hard, endured hardships, which is why we could reach here. Earlier we would get by with 250 ml oil, now 2 liters is not enough. This is the difference,” she says.

Pramod Shavikram Janjal, 40, who owns a 2 acre farm in Pasodi, is another example. With agriculture yielding no income, Janjal was forced to migrate to Surat to work in a textile dyeing factory in 2006, where he made Rs 3000 a month. Unable to get by, he returned to his 2 acre farm in early 2010 to try his hand at farming again, and started growing jowar and moong. “But income was less, and losses high, so I was forced to take two loans. Since farming wasn’t proving viable, I was forced to again migrate out of home,” he says.

He decided to return to the village again in 2015-16 when he heard about the possibility of getting employment through MGNREGA. Beginning watershed work in his own field with his wife, the family earned Rs 500 a day in 2015. “In the next 3-4 years, the income helped us repay the loans. With the water level increasing, farming has also improved. In the 2 acres, we now grow soybean and maize. Where we got Rs 10,000-15,000 from our land in 2012, the same land is now giving us Rs 1,50,000,” he says.

The family invested the profits earned from farming into purchasing 3 cows, which provides them with an additional income of Rs 1000-1200 a day. To Pramod, what makes everything worthwhile is that he no longer needs to leave home.
The benefits went beyond just income generation. “As groundwater recharged, water level in the soil and wells improved. Earlier, the well in my field only had water until it rained. This was despite the fact that there was a nala running next to it. Now water stays in the well, and the level is good too,” says Nandkishore Pharat, who has a 2.5 acre farm in Borgaon.

Over the course of time, farmers also started noticing an increase in agricultural yields. Kailash Keshav Khanded, 44, who owns a 15 acre farm in Pasodi used to grow urad, moong, soybean and cotton on his 15 acre farm. “Even though I was involved in farming, I wasn’t motivated to pursue it because the yield was so low. I started a kirana store on the side, but was still making losses,” he says.

In 2016, Kailash along with two members of the family, undertook watershed work on their farm through MGNREGA. In three years, they undertook compartment bunding and nala deepening on their farm, and dug a well. “We noticed a difference in 2-3 months itself. Water that used to flow off the farm, stayed. In 2016, we used to get 4-5 quintals of urad and moong per acre in one season. In 2019, this was up to 12 quintals of urad per acre and 12 quintals of moong per acre,” he says.

His yearly income of Rs 1,00,000 has increased to Rs 9,00,000. He plans to reinvest profits to set up a system of drip irrigation on his farm.

Drip and sprinkler systems not only reduce water use but also cut input costs and help increase crop yields, Kailash tells us. Today, hardly anyone in these villages practice surface or flood irrigation, the conventional but inefficient method that involves flooding the fields with water.

Apart from growing crops in two seasons, farmers are now also growing crops more suitable to the hydrological profile of their area, and those that give them better profits. “Earlier, sugarcane used to grow here, then farmers switched to jowar, but income wasn’t good. Now, we grow all kinds of crops like herbera (green chana), soybean, wheat, and maize. They are good for the soil, but also get us money from the market,” says Bhaskar Patil, a resident of Borgaon.

Pharat, for example, switched from growing jowar on his farm to a particular brand of chickpea known in these parts as ‘dollar’ on account of the high price it fetches in the market. A teacher by profession, he was forced to quit his job, because he was unable to pay the local private school in his vicinity the ‘donation’ to continue with it. Now that his annual income has increased from Rs 10,000 to Rs 1,50,000, he can send his only son to an English medium school.

His plans on investing all the profits he earns into his son’s education. “Money will not be a barrier for him. What I wasn’t able to become, my son will become,” he says.

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### PEOPLE BENEFITTED FROM PROJECT (UPTO SEPT 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Achievement</th>
<th>Cumulative Achieved (in numbers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmers benefited</td>
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<tr>
<td>Person days due to project work</td>
<td>1008630</td>
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<tr>
<td>People benefited due to efficient water utilization</td>
<td>1072964</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of women benefitted</td>
<td>13979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people trained</td>
<td>17817</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Key Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area Stabilized (in Hectares)</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water Harvesting Potential Created (Single Filing) (in Billion litres/Million Cubic Metres)</td>
<td>52.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative Water Harvesting Potential Created (Multiple Filing) (in Billion litres/Million Cubic Metres)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in Agricultural Production over Baseline (in Hectares)</td>
<td>18309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in Agricultural Production (in tonnes)</td>
<td>40866</td>
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</table>
With Support From SHGs, Women Find More Agency

The work undertaken especially benefited women, helping them gain more autonomy in their households and lives.

“Earlier, I had to beg everyone from my father-in-law to my husband for even simple household expenses and then also I wasn’t sure if my request would be heeded. I didn’t like it, but what other option did I have? In the last few years, that has changed. With the work, we got help to run household expenses. In addition, now I can buy things without asking anyone,” says 27 year old Nandashri Krishna Kakade, from Borgaon. Tuesdays, she says, are her favorite days of the week, because they are reserved for shopping.

Saving became a part of every family’s vocabulary. “Earlier there was nothing left over to save,” says Nandashri, “But once we started going to the field, talking to other women, an idea emerged to start a bachat ghat (Self Help Group). Since 2015, I have been a part of the Rohini mahila bachat ghat, where I contribute Rs 50 every month,” she adds.

Comprising a small group of women who come together to make regular monetary contributions, the Self Help Groups (SHGs) have empowered women to support one another, access financial and public services, and spearhead changes that affect the whole community. In SHG meetings that are held once every month, women discuss thrift and credit, and talk about everyday issues that impact them.

SHGs have also made a significant contribution in developing entrepreneurship aptitudes amongst women. For example, in Borgaon, Sunita Gajanand Fadat, with support from her SHG, and relatives, has purchased a small pulse mill. “There is a lot of pulse production in these parts, and no mill to process them. So I thought it would be a good idea,” she says.

In Pasodi, where more than 200 women are part of SHG groups, women have banded together to run a transport survive for milk collection and delivery. “Now that the village is producing so much milk, there was a need to start a transport service for milk collection. So we have purchased two vehicles, and hired a driver to do the same,” says Sima Khodode, secretary of the SHG.

**ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN TO INCREASE WOMENS PARTICIPATION (UPTO SEPT 2020)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Undertaken</th>
<th>Project (Achieved)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposure Visits</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Development Activities</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHG Training</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livelihood activities</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training on gender sensitivity</td>
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</table>
Communities Become More Entrepreneurial, Venture Into New Things

With livelihoods getting more secure, communities are also more open to experimenting with alternate crops and new methods of planting.

In Adha, several farmers, who were cultivating traditional crops, have switched to horticulture. “When food grain production dropped in drought years, I saw that farmers in our neighboring village who were growing fruits remained unaffected. With more water now available in my village, and the knowledge I have about irrigation, I thought I should get into fruit production too,” says Sakharam Gaekwad, who is growing papaya, on his 2 acre farm. Papaya production isn’t just profitable, it is also hassle-free, he says.

“Papaya is easy to grow, once you know how, quick to fruit and they fruit all year round,” he says. In Adha, apart from crops like wheat, maize and soybean, farmers are experimenting with fruits like guavas and mangoes.

They are also getting more entrepreneurial in approach. A case in point is 35 year old Puran Singh Babu Singh Tatu. “Four years ago, there was nothing here. Just a house made of tin,” says Puran Singh, as he shows us around his newly built two storey home. Doing watershed work on his fields, combined with a host of agricultural practices he learnt during the training, enabled him to make profits out of agriculture. “In the last couple of years, I have been trying to figure out how to run my agricultural practice like a business,” he says.

Through the profits, Puran Singh and his family have built a new home, a cattle ranch, and bought tractors. “The cattle gives us 135 liters of milk daily. We use the tractors on the field, but also rent them out to other families in the village,” he says. The additional income has allowed him to invest in fodder production, something he is hopeful of turning into a Farmer Producer Company (FPC).

In Sonkheda, farmers like Amol Lokhande and Rajendra Wankhede have invested the profits generated from agricultural production into their own Farmer Producer Company - Poornakarth FPC. “When the farmer does the hard work, why should middlemen take away the profit? With Poornakarth, we want farmers to reap the benefit of their work, for the money to stay in our villages,” Amol says. Presently, the FPC has 507 members from 18 villages, and is connected to nearly 2300 farmers. It procures chickpea from a thousand villagers at minimum support price, and sells them to the mandi, earning a one percent commission as profit. They also sell seeds and sprinkler sets to farmers at a discount.

Making use of certain schemes from state agricultural bodies that provide financial incentives, and support of WOTR, they have recently invested in infrastructure and equipment to start a small processing plant on their farm. “We have one machine that processes dals like tur, moong and peanuts, and have just purchased one for atta. In the coming year, we want to start our own atta brand, and retail it to outlets like D-mart. We have even thought of the name of the atta brand. It will be called Poornakarth Atta,” says Rajendra.
For example, to democratize governance on water issues and empower the community to set their own agenda, one of the first activities undertaken in any village was the formation of Village Development Councils (VDCs). Comprising anywhere between 7-19 members, the VDC was the executive body selected by the village from amongst its own members to plan, implement and monitor all watershed work undertaken.

Three years since the programme commenced, the VDCs still meet on a regular basis to discuss issues related to water conservation and management. “Now, the agenda isn’t as much about coping with water scarcity, as it is to prioritize its usage.” Budgeting water, therefore, has become a cornerstone of these meetings.

In training sessions villagers attended between 2015-19, they acquired knowledge about the geology of their lands, the water cycle, the recharge areas, and just how much water percolates to the ground, and runs off. They also learnt how to read rain gauges, measure the yield of a well, and formulae to calculate optimal water utilization.

The word ‘dam’ that once inspired only fear has started finding more acceptance. Residents of Borgaon remember a time in early 2000s when the entire village got together in the middle of the night to demolish an earthen check dam. “There was so much panic, so much fear that people’s land would get submerged. We demolished it in the middle of the night”.

Today, not only do villagers understand the science of watershed management, they are also more open to using it to manage their land and water resources to improve yields, incomes and quality of life.

“This obviously didn’t happen overnight. When we went on exposure visits, we saw what could be done. We attended farmer field schools, were part of various trainings, saw crop demos, learnt about organic farming, vermicomposting. Through these things, we got knowledge. “Pehle knowledge hi nahi thi. Jab knowledge aai, soch apne aap badal gai (Earlier, we didn’t have knowledge. When we got the knowledge, the mindset changed on its own),” says Yashwant Rao Chavan.

Change has continued in these parts also because certain systems and frameworks that were put in place between 2014-19 are still adhered to, villagers say.

Small actions, year on year, have led to big changes.

The biggest change of them all, though, is the one that has happened in people’s mindsets with respect to how they view natural resources.

“Earlier, we were short sighted. Everyone was thinking only about today, no one was bothered about the future. When the work started, and things started changing, we also started to understand that if we don’t think of the future now, nothing can change,” says Samadhan Pradhan, a resident of Borgaon.

Co-operation, Consensus, Community Spirit: How Change Continues

Water Budget displayed outside the Sarpanch Office in Adha ensures ownership and better management of water resources.
When they attend VDC meetings now, they come up with a plan to prioritize water usage needs based on the needs of the community, and then collaboratively figure out the list of crops that can be grown with the remaining water available. This water budget is usually public and displayed in the middle of the village, so that the entire village is aware of it.

Some villages, like Adha, now also have strict rules against drilling borewells. “If anyone requires additional water, they can just petition the VDC, and water is then allocated within reasonable limits,” Gajanand Kale says.

“We have a strict rule against using borewells because we know that even if one person starts with it, the whole village will suffer,” he adds.

The crucial thing, in order to do this, the villagers have learnt, is developing consensus and cooperation. “We all belong to different castes, have different political affiliations, different priorities and needs. We have our share of conflicts. But when it comes to water, we keep these differences aside.

Paani hai, toh hum hai (Because there is water, we exist),” Gajanand says. “Without it, nothing else matters”. In this unequal and competitive landscape, the shared respect for water and the community spirit of the villages stands out.

“A lot has changed in these last few years. But none of it would have been possible without HUFs support, or WOTR’s guidance, because of whom the programme reached us,” says Gajanand.

“We’d like to thank the organizations for bringing this opportunity to our doorstep, and enabling us every step of the way,” he adds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Total Project (Plan)</th>
<th>Total Project (Achieved)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
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<td>147</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agri Trainings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farmer Field Days</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farmers Exposure Visits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vermicompost Units</td>
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<td>Micro Irrigation Units</td>
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<td>Weather Stations Installed</td>
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<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water budgeting exercises</td>
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</table>

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