

In Loving Memory

Fr. Hermann Bacher

1924 - 2021



Dear well-wishers of WOTR,

On the 14th of September 2021, Fr. Hermann Bacher, popularly known as the “father of community-led watershed development in India”, passed away at the ripe old age of 97 years in Switzerland. Born in 1924 in the picturesque Swiss alpine village of Muenster, Fr. Bacher came to India in 1948 at the young age of 24 years. He was to spend the next 60 years of his life here, most of it in Maharashtra. Struck by the poverty he saw in rural Maharashtra, especially in the then drought afflicted Ahmednagar district, he dedicated his life to the upliftment of the poor, the landless and rural women.

Beginning in 1965, in collaboration with local elected representatives, government agencies, banks (particularly the Ahmednagar District Central Cooperative Bank), the regional Agriculture University (MPKV) and various donors, he helped thousands of landless labourers secure title to land under the Land Reforms Act, 1957. Together with this, he organised lakhs of farmers to develop their farms and increase their agricultural productivity by helping them access irrigation, improved and hybrid seeds, modern agricultural practices and appropriate technologies. He helped them cut terraces, level and bund their fields, dig wells, install pumps, build Lift Irrigation Schemes, irrigation canals and check dams, underground dams and KT weirs on streams and rivers. To sustain this effort, Fr. Bacher set up the Social Centre at Ahmednagar in 1968 and the Groundwater Investigation Team at Shrirampur.

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The effects of the drought that ravaged Maharashtra in 1972 – large-scale hunger, the suffering, distress migration, empty villages and the severe water scarcity all around - had a profound impact on Fr. Bacher and led him to re-calibrate his developmental approach. He realised that sustainable prosperity would follow, if, like a rising tide it lifted all boats.



In rain-dependent rural Maharashtra, this meant a shift from “resource exploitation” to sustainable resource use, or “resource mobilisation”, as he described it; from over extracting and mining groundwater to harvesting rainwater, wherever it fell, conserving it and allowing it to sink underground to recharge the ground water table. And since rain fell in the watersheds and landscapes villagers lived in, the only way to harvest and conserve it wherever it fell was to undertake watershed development measures beginning from the hill tops, across the landscapes and down to the valleys – from “ridge-to-the valley”, as he was fond of saying. The idea being that “running water must be made to walk; walking water made to stop and sink underground”.

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This meant, planting trees and grasses, conserving forests, undertaking soil and water conservation works (such as digging contour trenches, raising farm bunds, etc.) and building water harvesting structures on the streams (check dams, earthen bunds, etc) in a systematic manner across the entire landscape of the village, beginning from the top. He would often say that “without watershed development there is no solution to drought”, or as he pithily put it in Marathi, “पाणलोटशिवाय दुष्काळाला पर्याय नाही”!

Thus was born the idea which later became the large-scale Indo-German Watershed Development Program (IGWDP) that he conceived and launched in Maharashtra in 1989, at the age of 65 in collaboration with and the support of the Governments of India, Maharashtra and Germany, NABARD, WOTR and the NGO sector.



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Its unique and ground-breaking feature was that it put the villagers in the driver's seat - the community would plan the program, implement it and maintain the watershed assets. Funds, substantial amounts, would be given directly to them and they would have to manage and account for them, publicly. The NGOs would build their capacities and facilitate the interface with the local administration and the funders. It was a momentous exercise of facilitated community action for shared development outcomes, at the grassroots.

And a truly audacious undertaking given that at the time, "watershed development" was a term hardly understood, villagers were largely seen as beneficiaries rather than as actors in their own right, village institutions managed relatively paltry sums of money and had hardly any access to technical know-how! Despite the risks, Fr. Bacher stoutly insisted that this was the only way to catalyse a "people's movement for watershed development" in Maharashtra and across the country. He argued that "those who benefit must be responsible for the same—they must implement, manage funds and be held accountable for outcomes if they are to remain invested in and own the project" - a pre-condition for sustainably securing water, drought-proofing the rural economy, increasing farm incomes and improving overall quality of life.

To facilitate, support, coordinate and build the capacities of participants in the IGWDP, Fr. Bacher and I, founded the Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR) in 1993.

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The IGWDP was singularly successful. It was replicated in other states and led to the setting up of the Watershed Development Fund at NABARD by the GOI, which together with allied and NABARD's own funds, has helped replicate its approach of ridge-to-valley, people-led watershed development in more than 6 million acres in 19 states/UTs impacting millions of lives.

WOTR and its associates have undertaken and supported developmental works in over 5,200 villages across 9 states impacting over 4.3 million people, of which watershed development works cover over 3.6 million acres. More importantly, the impacts realised and approach developed have significantly contributed to and shaped the discourse and practice of watershed development in the country.

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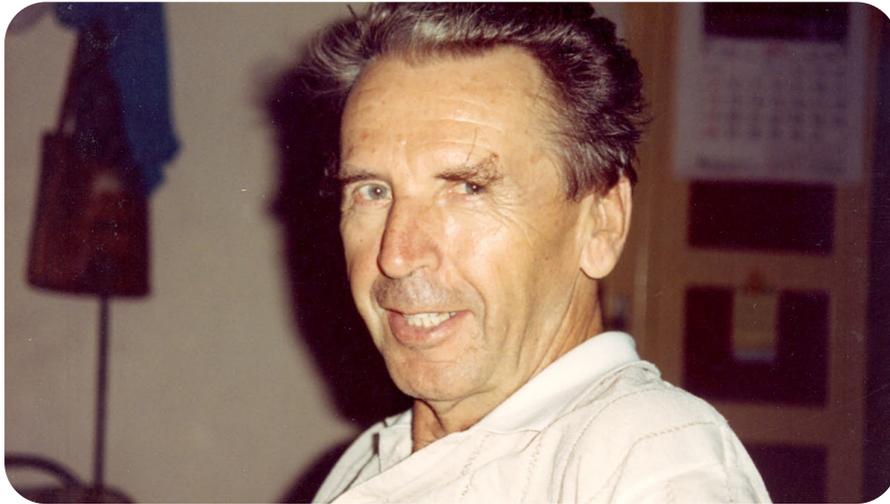
In recognition of his outstanding efforts, Fr. Bacher was given Germany's highest civilian award, the Federal Cross of the Order of Merit in 1994 at a ceremony in the watershed village of Mendhwan in Sangamner followed by the Krishi Bhushan, at the hands of the Governor of Maharashtra, in the same year. Several honors followed and in 2010, the Government of Maharashtra conferred upon him and WOTR its highest Award in agriculture, "The Dr. Punjabrao Deshmukh Krishi Ratna". In 2017, the UNCCD awarded WOTR the prestigious "Land for Life Award 2017" instituted by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)



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Fr. Bacher returned to Switzerland in 2008, after spending 60 years in India at the age of 85 years. Switzerland was his “Janmasthan” (birth place); but India, and Maharashtra, in particular, was his “Karmasthan” (field of action).

Known for his humility and simplicity, his depth of knowledge, his love and commitment to uplifting the poor and his unique ability to inspire people to action by his own example of sacrifice and purposeful action, Fr. Bacher was widely regarded and respected as a true “man of God” for whom selfless service of the poor was worship at its most sublime. They knew him and called him “Bacher Baba”.

May this great man, whose memory will long outlive his earthly sojourn, rest in peace!

In commiseration,

Crispino Lobo
Co-Founder & Managing Trustee
Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR)