

Waging war against water scarcity: women show the way

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Patan (north Gujarat), India :The dusty wasteland stretching out from the village is barren except for thorny *babul* shrubs. For three successive years, a drought has stalked Dabhi.

Life here, as in other villages in the arid Patan district in north Gujarat, revolves around water – or the lack of it.

Two years ago, images of vast expanses of brown, barren land, truckloads of animal carcasses and distress migration in the state dominated the front pages of newspapers and television news bulletins. The media called it the first drought of the new century, and one of the worst to affect calamity-prone Gujarat.

Today, residents of Dabhi are still grappling with a water shortage. Food, fodder, and fuelwood remain the prime concerns. But an extraordinary story – as big as the drought itself – is unfolding, as the doughty village women fight the deserts.

This is one of the most resource-poor and underdeveloped pockets of a prosperous state which has given India some of its best-known industrialists. But there is no major industry here. The male literacy rate in the district is below 40%; less than 25% of women in this region can read or write.

Patan has an average annual rainfall of 20 inches. Droughts are frequent. So are sand storms. The soil and water are saline. Ruthless exploitation of ground water has made things worse. The water table is sinking at the rate of 3 metres per year. The people work as farmers and cattle-breeders. Agriculture is totally dependent on rain. So, in times of drought, crops and cattle suffer. Village after village empty out as families move in search of water and work.

However, efforts by the community, especially women, are changing life and attitudes in this harsh, desert land.

The village pond is the pride of Dabhi. It glistens with water unlike so many others which have gone dry. Women dressed in bright red, gold and yellow crowd around the village well waiting their turn to scoop up the little water inside in clay pots.

Four years ago, there was no water in the pond nor in the well in Dabhi. Women and children had to walk miles in the scorching sun to fetch water for their families. A community-led project to desilt and clean up the pond changed things dramatically.

“I got blisters in my hands digging out the thorny shrubs surrounding the pond. But we all worked. We cleaned up the pond, dug deeper and then built a bund around it. I got paid in cash and food for the work I put in: Rs 500 a week and

vegetables to feed my family,” says Ramila behn, a Dabhi resident and a member of the village ‘water committee’ (*pani samiti*).

The village water committee, one among several in the Santhalpur block, takes decision on all critical issues relating to water. The committees came up following efforts by BDMSA , a district-level federation of women’s self-help groups to mobilize the village women. Many women who now actively participate in the village water committees had never stepped out of their homes earlier.

It was not a smooth passage. Even as the village was reeling from drought, an earthquake struck the region on January 2001. Ramila behn and many others in the village lost their homes. But thanks to the water in the village pond, the men and the women did not have to buy water to build their new houses.

The long stretches of dryness destroyed the crops. The poor farmers in Dabhi would have had no choice but to migrate had it not been for the watershed projects which came their way.

Dabhi is not an isolated case. In 75 villages in the acutely water-stressed Santhalpur block, Patan(formerly Banaskantha) , community-led initiatives to harvest and conserve scant rainwater have brought about visible changes.

Villagers have demonstrated that rain water can be collected in dried up ponds after desilting, cleaning and deepening them , old village wells can be recharged and ponds with plastic lining can effectively hold water. The lining also helps water from becoming saline – a major problem in this area. Farm bunds have been built so that the rain water does not go waste.

Many villagers in Patan lost their homes in the January 2001 quake which devastated Gujarat. Today, village women are eager to point out the simple structures some of them have erected in their new homes to harvest roof rainwater. In villages, where the ponds are dry, women are filling up these structures with water supplied by government tankers to cut down on time fetching water. The accent is on community participation which means that the local women and the community are the users, managers and owners of the projects and that the community contributes part of the costs of the activities.

Much of the physical and cultural changes that one sees as one drives around Santhalpur and Radhanpur blocks in Patan have been made possible by initiatives supported by the United Nations Development Programme, (UNDP) to harness water. .

In partnership with the district government, and the Banaskantha DWCRA Mahila SEWA Association (BDMSA), a federation of district level womens’ self-help groups and producers collectives, the UNDP has helped vulnerable villagers to not only cope with the threat of a continual water crisis but also

transform the way men and women relate to each other in this traditional society.

The turnaround in Dabhi as elsewhere in Patan has been a gradual process. The women's self-help groups -- the agents of change -- were activated by SEWA, a well-known trade union with over 3,00,000 workers across the country, SEWA works with poor women in the informal sector.

SEWA got involved with the issue of drinking water in Banaskantha in the late '80s following a three year severe drought in the state. In 1988, SEWA launched a regional development programme which now covers more than 80 villages of Radhapour and Santhalpur blocks of what was then Banaskantha.

"SEWA was invited by the Gujarat Water Sewerage and Supply Board (GWSSB) to take care of the socio-economic side of the drought-affected villages which came under the project area of the Santhalpur Integrated Regional Water Supply Scheme" says Neeta Patel, coordinator of the Banaskantha DWCRMA Mahila SEWA Association, which implemented UNDP's water conservation and harvesting initiatives in the region.

Water was the entry point. But then a lot of other things happened

"When we started roaming around in the villages, we started discovering key areas of concern --- livelihood, social security, health care, child care, insurance, housing, savings and credit." says Patel.

Mumtaz Khan who coordinates BDMSA's field work says she and her team soon realized the centrality of water as an economic issue for the women.

"Many of the tribes like Ahirs were skilled in embroidery but till then, they had not thought of exploiting their talent commercially. They used to trade their crafts with utensils. WE decided to develop markets for these people and that is how the idea of Banascraft was born. We also opened up other income-generating opportunities. For instance, we revived milk cooperatives by procuring fodder from other districts when fodder was not locally available.

Khan says one of the most heartening outcomes of the community-led watershed projects has been the growing confidence among village women ..

Today, Dabhi resident Champa Behn and other members of the village water committee knowledgeably talk about the technical aspects of roof rainwater harvesting structures in their village.

"You have to carefully look at all the material. Otherwise the suppliers can cheat you. I have caught them trying to give us a half-cracked pipe." says Champa who does not feel handicapped by her lack of formal education. .

"People from other villages and districts have come to see Dabhi's efforts at creating structures to harvest rain water. I am not afraid talking to engineers."

She is equally self-assured while talking to her husband Kantibhai, a grocery shop owner and the only man in Dabhi to possess a mobile phone

"There is not enough water to grow crops but it is enough to grow fodder. We don't have to buy fodder. Our cattle are still alive," says Kanti Bhai.

When a team from UNDP came on a site visit, the villagers requested for special tools to help them cut fodder. "50 families in Dabhi got these equipments. It has helped us save time. Earlier I spent 2 hours cutting fodder. Now that has come down to 30 minutes," adds Kantibhai, one among the beneficiaries.

In village after village in Santhalpur where farm bunds have been built, ponds have been cleaned and wells recharged through this community participation, one meets little-known heroines – and heroes – who helped slow down distress migration.

In Padeshpura village in Patan, Mena Behn, an elderly woman recalls the time when the ponds ran dry, crops did not grow and her family packed its belongings, clambered onto a bullock cart and set out in search of water and work.

"There was not sitting space for everyone. Only pregnant women and lactating mothers were allowed to sit right through the journey. Others had to wait their turn. We would be looking for work --- in Mehasana, in Ahmedabad. Sometimes, the journey took 5 nights. We would sleep out in the open, under the trees."

That was more than five years ago. Since then a lot has changed in Padeshpura.

Villagers themselves came up with the idea about repairing the ponds which had become dysfunctional. The men and women together cleared the pond, and last year a farm bund was built. The work generated the much-needed income

"Last year, it did not rain much. But the pond filled up. We did not have to go far to fetch water. Our cattle had enough water to drink. I could work more and I had more time to look after my children. The children themselves had more time for studies because they did not have to stand in queue for water," says Meethi Behn, a member of the Padeshpura water committee.

"We are successful because we involve the people, especially women, at every level. Our programmes are demand-driven. We mobilized village level meetings where the people themselves decided on their priorities. The women

became members of the water committees and took charge. Other agencies may be doing the same thing but if the people are not involved, structures are of no use. They are not maintained. Today, even if there is no rain, the women have found other uses for the structures for harvesting roof rainwater. Time saved is money. So they are prepared to buy tanker water and fill up the tanks. They are using the time saved to do embroidery, and other remunerative work” says Neeta Patel.

The women’s water committees map natural resources, plan and manage the water harvesting structures, and set rules for water management in the village. Other concrete outcomes of the project include community infrastructure include 60 roof rainwater harvesting structures, agrifilm lined pond, and deep wells.

The programmes have significantly upgraded capacity in this resource poor area. Women have been imparted technical as well as financial skills to manage the water shed projects, as well as related activities like fodder distribution. Today, there are barefoot midwives/health workers in remote border villages such as Fangli as well as barefoot women technicians and managers.

Rain is still the critical issue in Patan but even if there is little rain, there are alternatives which villagers can explore: embroidery, crafts, milk cooperatives, nursery plantations, compost units, gum collection and salt farming.

Patel says that though initially skeptical about the ability of poor uneducated women to manage their own water resources, government officials are now more supportive.

“The district rural development agency (DRDA) facilitated the UNDP-supported initiatives by providing us GIS maps. These maps have helped us identify water sources and are now used as monitoring tools. The DRDA have also helped us to get technical sanction to construct check dams and so on.”

A key reason behind the success of the UNDP supported initiatives on water in this region is its choice of partners. The projects have brought out long term changes because they were demand-driven and not donor-driven. At the gram sabhas, or village meetings, or at the pani panchayats (water meets), the people themselves chalked out their priorities, be it farm bunding, desilting of ponds, check dams, compost pits, well recharging or nurseries.

“I found the water harvesting projects are very popular. It builds up the capacity of the people to face drought and it provides employment. There is also social upliftment because the women have been at the forefront of the activities. Now there is competition among the villages to get similar projects,” says Harsh Vohra, director of DRDA, Patan

As the summer looms , village women in are gearing up for another hot, dry spell. For the women, it is time to harness their energy and fight the desert once again.

Jari behn Rabari, member of the water committee of another village in the district looks back to the good old days with nostalgia. "We used to form groups. Two men and two women. The men did the digging; women moved the earth. Per week, per head, it brought Rs 400 and vegetables to feed the family. While clearing the pond, once we had to confront encroachers . We told them they could do this and we cleared up the place. Then when the rains came, the water filled up. We had water in the wells and money. We bought vegetables and used some of the money to buy seeds – millet, soyabean,. We planted the seeds , we also made a compost pit out of the cattle waste."

It did not rain much. The crops Jari behn had sowed died but even today, there is enough fodder to feed the cattle. The milk provides nourishment for the family and fetches extra money.

The village women in Patan say they are better prepared today to confront disasters even if the drought lingers... At a recent meeting at the BDMSA office in Radhanpur, the women spent hours working on contingency plans.. There is talk of a village level livelihood security fund , of alternative sources of income, and canvassing for projects from other national and international agencies through the BDMSA and SEWA .

Padeshpura villance head (sarpanch) Lado Bhai chuckles about the changes sweeping the lives of the village women in the region. " In my family, ,my wife who is a member of the water committee now handles all the household accounts. I am relieved because it means more free time for me. "

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