

# **WOMEN'S EYE VIEW**

## **WOMEN, WATER AND COMMUNITIES**

### **The Context**

Traveling long distances to fetch water is part of many a woman's daily survival activities in the Bhal region in rural Gujarat. One of the most grim battles for overcoming the acute scarcity of water is waged on a daily basis. The entire responsibility for finding water for the communities' needs devolves on women. The seriousness of the issue can be understood from the fact that in summer, violent fights over water shortages are quite common. It is equally common to see groups of women in search of water. When they fail to find any, entire villages have to make do with drinking saline water which is non-potable or simply wait for infrequent supplies from tankers.

Several parts in the state of Gujarat suffer from an acute water problem. Water scarcity has grown to alarming proportions mainly as a consequence of lopsided development processes. The government's policy interventions have typically overlooked traditional systems and prescribed short term and ad hoc "solutions" which have only exacerbated the water woes of the population. This is most apparent in the policy of identifying and assisting 'no source' villages, defined as those with no dependable source of drinking water. Since no long term solutions have been found, these villages have grown from 5086 in 1980 to more than 14,000 in 1990.

Local water supply systems in the Bhal area have been ravaged by salinity. The extreme climatic conditions and peculiar terrain create a situation where even meagre rains in the monsoons cause flooding. This water progressively turns saline after the monsoon since the soil is saline in nature.

A casual visitor to these coastal villages of Dholera, Khun, Rahtalav, Mingalpur, in 1981 would have seen several houses sealed with mud; only old people and children in the vicinity—since the area suffered from distress migration as high as 80 per cent.

### **Mobilising local communities**

It was in this context that Uthan, an NGO based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, has consistently sought appropriate solutions to the drinking water problems of rural Gujarat, turned its attention to this area. Utthan began in 1981 with the simple idea of connecting the people to the government because it clearly felt that there was a need for information to flow from one to the other. Policy makers, it felt, were often working in a vacuum. At the same time in order to understand the full dimensions and magnitude of this seemingly simple water problem Utthan began to work closely with communities.

Clearly the scarcity of water was a problem. But while men interpreted this problem in terms of loss of agricultural opportunity forcing them to migrate in search of employment women viewed the problem differently. For them the water scarcity meant walking for miles in search of water. During this preliminary process, members of the newly formed Utthan were conscious of the fact that they were after all outsiders in this terrible situation. They were also clear that they did not want local communities to depend on an external agency.

It was decided that the capacities of local people must be built and they should have an autonomous local organisation of insiders from within the local communities to give them a stake and sense of ownership in the whole process. This organisation (now called Mahiti) would take the lead while Utthan would continue as a resource organisation.

Around this time, members of the Utthan team had discussions with the community leaders on natural resource management. In village after village, the 'piloodi tree' was mentioned. Interestingly this tree was not listed in the records with the Forest Department. Community members and elders revealed that the tree could significantly reduce soil salinity. The tree had once been part of the natural vegetation in the area. Since Utthan was committed from the start of its initiative in the region, to make the best use of local resources and traditional knowledge the idea of planting this tree in a new drive appealed to it. Through painstaking trial and error the appropriate planting method for the tree was discovered.

By now the piloo tree was seen as the wonder fix that would address two major problems at once; it would arrest deteriorating ecological condition of the region and also provide an alternate source of income since the oil from the seed is used in pharmaceutical products. This unexpected income, it was expected, would reduce the exploitative control wielded by darbars—upper caste moneylenders.

### **Learning from Women and Communities**

At this stage women made their first significant contribution to the Utthan intervention. Women from the local communities had detected that behind the apparent irrefutable logic of the "piloo prescription" was a critical flaw. No initiative would get off the ground unless the issue of drinking water was not first addressed, they pointed out. It was after all this major problem that was responsible for the high migration and the indebtedness that most families suffered from in the first place. As Devuben a local woman leader and one of the first members to be inducted into Mahiti pointed out, representatives from Utthan often visited her village, but because such large numbers were migrating, the villages would be deserted. Most of the men had migrated—they were all indebted to landlords and there was some hope of repaying these debts if the men could find employment in the city.

Thus Utthan Mahiti was made to realise that access to and control over scarce water resources is central to the community's well being. Water was to be the central issue around which women were to be mobilised. It affects income, health, migration patterns, exacerbates caste tensions and conflicts.

### **Learning and adapting on the way**

In order to find viable solutions to the problem of scarce drinking water women needed to go out of their homes, visit other villages and meet government authorities. In order to do this, women first needed to confront the social barriers within their households and communities. The process of seeking solutions to drinking water scarcity took on other dimensions. Most important among these was the social barriers and age old biases that women confronted. But their determination to find a lasting solution to their problems saw them through many a tricky situation.

The story of Katuben in Mingalpur village demonstrates how focused women were in their search for a solution to their drinking water problems. Utthan had organised an exposure visit to Andhra Pradesh for community women's groups. The women's groups in the village decided to send Katuben. However a few days before the trip she announced she would not go since her husband wanted to know who would cook for him and mind the cattle while she was gone. The women's groups offered to take on these responsibilities. But when she returned her husband beat her and threw her out, at the instigation of his male friends. The women's collective came forward and confronted Katuben's husband warning him about their resolve to stand together. Clearly the women were determined to find a viable solution for themselves and would not even bow down to social barriers.

Utthan did not start out by deciding to work with women as a deliberate policy rather than men. But in the course of their interactions they were able to build greater rapport with women who seemed to perceive both their problems and solutions in such a way as to benefit the whole community.

At the time of Uthan's intervention in 1981 the World Bank's project to lay a pipeline for drinking water in that area was already underway. But it had inherent problems. For one thing water was being brought from long distances, reducing the water level. It would have to be pumped and this meant depending on electricity and the authorities who control machinery. The distant villagers who had a greater need for water would probably be losers and the socially and politically powerful would monopolise the water.

Other methods that could be tried included deepening ponds. But like the pipeline solution it did not appear to offer a long-term answer. Utthan Mahiti then had several discussions with older community members. What would they have done without the pipeline? The common answer was they would have reverted to storing water in ponds. But deep ponds were not possible because of the high salinity in the soil.

Many local men and women had been involved in construction work for irrigation canals. One of the techniques used to prevent water salinity was plastic lining for the pond. It had worked for irrigation and it was decided to try it out for drinking water ponds as well.

At the Mahiti experiment centre meanwhile, various methods like roof water collection, solar distillation, reverse osmosis and lining of ponds with plastic were carried out. Eventually the method of rainwater harvesting in the lined pond was considered the best alternative and was first tried out in the village of Rahtalav. The demonstration in this village went off well. However, this demonstration had to be converted into a programme or a replicable model for the other villages to benefit.

### **Leading from the front**

A lot of effort was required to convince an apathetic local administration that rain water harvesting was the most appropriate solution for the villages of Bhal. At this stage men appeared uninterested whereas women, eager to see the solution replicated across villages in the region came forward and made a pitch with the policy makers in its favour. Mahila mandal representatives in a shrewd move marketed the scheme by harping on the spin off benefits like employment generation, which they calculated, would appeal to the mass of reluctant men in the community. At the same time they underplayed what they clearly saw as a real achievement—the sheer availability of water for people, cattle and other uses.

It was women who took the lead in convincing villagers to stay behind and carry out the pond excavation work. They took part in the process of obtaining funds from the NREP (National Rural employment Programme) and other agencies. When local power equations and petty corruption threatened to jeopardise the program with charges of non-payment, it was the women who intervened and ensured that the due amounts were reimbursed.

In one of the villages the Sarpanch initially refused to allow the women to select the pond site and pressurised the irrigation supervisors to approve the site he had selected. But in a show of defiance, women urged villagers to dig at the site they had selected and for three days they ensured that work continued unsupervised by any government official. Women also kept a register recording the amount of work put in by individual labourers. In normal circumstances such work would simply not be recognised and therefore would go unpaid. But it was the women again who in their new-found confidence convinced the collector and eventually persuaded the local official to make the payments.

Often women who had taken the lead in the construction of the lined ponds had inadvertently managed to incur the wrath of the men. For instance in 1986-87 the proposal for the construction of lined ponds took a long time in coming through. 10,000 men and women had stayed behind instead of migrating, hoping to be employed in the construction of the lined ponds. Men expressed their frustration over the delay to women.

Throughout the process it was observed that women took the lead in the process, they were willing to take risks, active support from men took longer in coming. It was only after men saw for themselves the support coming in from outside agencies like the World Bank Technology Mission or the State Water supply Board or district authorities.

At some junctures this experiment was to be tried out in other villages but was in dire need of government funds so that a preliminary search and experiment of the same model could be done at other villages too. Men were unwilling to confront government authorities and again it was the women who were at the forefront of this effort.

At the village level the major obstacle was the stranglehold of darbars—the men were afraid to do anything that would incur the wrath of the darbars. Savings groups played an important role in breaking down these defenses since they served to erode in a small but significant way the power of the darbars. Women also found that they could use small amounts to visit government authorities. Women worked to reduce the influence of darbars. They recognised that the stranglehold of the darbars was impeding their access to water. So they used savings and credit mobilization to chip away at the darbar's control.

### **Designing and demonstrating a solution**

Once this decentralised system was implemented and the local water resources tapped for drinking water, they had to be managed. Here too women employed a variety of methods and ensured that these ponds were regularly de-watered before the monsoons to clean it up. They have given their labour for digging channels to fill up the pond or have contributed for the services of the watchman. In the villages of Dholera women have proven themselves not only as active participants at the planning stage but also at the implementation and management of the lined pond. The women's savings groups in many villages have provided money for the maintenance of the ponds. They have also been active in spreading the know-how of this

alternative to other villages and motivating them to unite and demand the construction of these ponds from the policy makers.

Various management systems for maintaining the water resources have evolved in different villages. Some have water committees, some have panchayats, while others have mahila mandals and all are invariably energised by women. Motivated by the initial success of the plastic lined ponds, women have become involved in various activities like savings and credit, constructing bio-gas units, spreading health awareness and marketing kardi and obtaining land for forestation.

### **Tangible Benefits**

Migration in the villages of Dholera declined from 80 per cent to less than 50 per cent after this initiative. Finally in 1990, the alternative of the plastic lined ponds was accepted by the Gujarat Water supply and Sewerage Board and the World Bank. It was implemented in 12 other villages. As of today there are 20 ponds in 19 villages of Bhal and many other villages have already applied to the Gujarat Water supply and Sewerage Board to be included in the coming Water Plan.

Though lined ponds in themselves represent a breakthrough for the women and communities in Bhal, it is by no means a total solution. Water is still needed for a host of other reasons—washing clothes, irrigation, cattle and construction. However it was to a large extent women and their collectives themselves who prioritised their requirements. Exploring the secondary and tertiary levels of the water is bound to take some time. At the end of the experiment though it had become clear to Utthan that the scope of the issue had to be widened to include more than just drinking water. It has resulted in the formation of PRAVAH a network of activists, experts working toward creating a platform for initiating and mobilising people's action for ensuring drinking water to all in Gujarat.

The extraordinary contributions and participation of women in the drinking water initiatives of Bhal generated sufficient energy that led to the formation of Bhal Samiti. This is an apex body of 60 representatives (30 men and 30 women) from 47 villages in the Bhal region. It has been fully functional since 1995. The Bhal Samiti has collaborated with the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board (GWSSB) on a Roof Water Collection Scheme for 1000 households. They received financial resources from the GWSSB while the Samiti will supervise the construction. The labour cost, which amounts to 20 per cent of the project, will be borne by individual households. Based on this demonstration the scheme has been institutionalised at the state level. Several organisations and community groups have taken up the scheme for implementation.

After its successes in Bhal, Mahiti continues to provide guidance to the Samiti as well as ensure that gender issues are well represented. Apart from water and livelihoods, Mahiti is weaving in issues like dowry, caste atrocities and domestic violence. It is also playing a role in strengthening local leadership through training. The all-encompassing issue of water has acquired a momentum of its own, thanks to the single-minded commitment that women displayed more than a decade ago. Today that movement has grown to address even more complex facets and needs of this problem faced by communities in this water scarce region.