

Kalakhoont village's spin out of the poverty cycle began on a rainy day in June this year. Four days of rain filled up to the brim the long-forgotten tank in this nondescript village of Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh (MP), India. Crippled by two consecutive droughts, when an NGO, Action for Social Advancement, offered to renovate the tank, it was hard for the residents to decide to contribute 25% of the renovation cost. Three-metres of silt was removed in the renovation. The decision has paid rich dividends and now promises to change the lives of the villagers forever. "There is enough water for the next three years," says an excited Nana Basna, president of the lift-irrigation society formed to regulate water use in the village. "The stored water will be enough to irrigate more than 61 hectares (ha) of land".



20,000 villages secured food production by reviving rainwater harvesting. Photo: Ganesh Pancare / CSE

A story of hope and of major change

For the first time in 50 years, several state governments are dealing with drought in a different way - moving away from drought relief to drought mitigation. The droughts of 2000 and 2001 have seen Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Rajasthan undertake major rainwater harvesting programmes - getting people to conserve rainwater that falls in their villages.

This year the MP government organised the world's biggest ever rainwater conservation programme — *Pani Roko Abhiyan* (Stop the water campaign). Chanting *Gaon ka paani gaon me, Khet ka paani khet mein* (Water of the village in the village, Water of the farm in the farm), some 706,304 water harvesting structures were created from February to June.

In the four states put together, there are probably over 20,000 villages today undertaking rainwater harvesting seriously. The good rains of June and July this year have already filled up tanks, ponds, *johads* (traditional earthen check dams) and other structures built by people with support from government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). There is jubilation.

But this achievement also poses several challenges for governments and NGOs. Firstly, how will they ensure that the many thousands of structures are properly maintained? Experience shows that when communities harvest rainwater for 5-8 years and keep groundwater recharged, they can withstand as much as three years of consecutive droughts. However sustainability of the structures is crucial and depends solely on who manages these structures. Government

apathy has led to the death of millions of the country's water structures. Where communities are in control this does not happen easily.

In MP, people will be given absolute ownership of the structures to which they contributed one fourth of the costs. The state government is incorporating certain structural changes for transfer of ownership to the *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) who will be responsible for the maintenance of the structures. Yet, the Gram Swaraj Act that gives power to the village assemblies seems almost ineffective. In Rajasthan, the minister of irrigation, Kamla Beniwal, ordered the demolition of a *johad* built by the community of Lava ka Baas being of the opinion that: "People do not have the right to tamper with the flow of water... as water resources belong to the government".

Secondly, the experience of villages like Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra, and Sukhomajri in Haryana, which started water harvesting in the 1970s, shows that this is just the beginning of rural ecological and economic regeneration. Water improves agriculture, improved agriculture improves animal husbandry and once people begin to harvest water they begin to take care of their watershed, which means more trees and forests. The combined incomes from improved agriculture, animal husbandry and tree wealth have the potential to not just alleviate, but literally eradicate rural poverty. How will governments and NGOs ensure that water harvesting leads to total ecological and economic regeneration of our villages over 10-15 years?

To make water conservation a sustainable social movement the government needs to put in prolonged efforts. Most of India's poverty eradication programmes have failed because they have been short-term interventions. Even India's largest watershed programme in MP is set to withdraw from villages after only four years, and will as in previous experiences undo the advantage of drought proofing. Ecological regeneration only brings prosperity when it is managed with mature community institutions that need time to be built up.

And, finally, what does this mean for people's rights over water? India's water laws, mindless derivatives of the colonial laws, give too many rights to the government. As a result, when chief ministers want water harvesting structures built, the irrigation departments look away. But not when a village or a NGO wants to do so. Will the government get rid of its 19th century hangover and hand over the rights of rainwater to the people in the 21st century?

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More information on up-scaling water harvesting in India: LEISA, ILEIA Newsletter March 2000, Vol.16, No.1, pp11-15.

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