

WATER MATTERS, WATER RIGHT

जल अधिकार, जीवन आधार



CONTENTS

- **Editorial ...2**, ● **Lead Story:** Changing the landscape- Empowered women together seek water and rights...3, ● **NEWS...5**, ● **Case Study:** Self-motivation and rationale in actions...7, ● **AWARDS AND RECOGNITION** Water crusader Anuja Devi honoured...8.



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Assure Life: Ensure the Water Rights Bill

If water is life, as popularly quoted, then it should be made available to all with dignity and without any discrimination. But today with 40 per cent of India deprived of even clean drinking water for, an easy flow from piped tap water for 24x7 is a mere distant dream. Several schemes and plans abound on paper to make water available to all and to make water a right but unfortunately the ground reality tells a very different story, basically a dry and sordid one. That women and girls are caught in the vortex of these water struggles depriving them of life and education and making their life a drudgery due to non availability of water and its inequitable



distribution is for all to see. This phenomenon is not limited to the parched Bundelkhand but all the village of India where the water crisis is only aggravating weighing down the women with the burden of fetching water. From early morning, sometimes from 3 o'clock it's the women who remain preoccupied with its collection. In Bundelkhand girls from a very young age are forced to carry the burden of pitchers on their head which women continue to do till they are frail and old. In many villages the girls are unable to even go to school because of the preoccupation with water. Caste discrimination and biases are evidently prevent especially Dalits and other most backward communities from accesses to water. Absence of water rights legislation places the rich and the have-nots at different ends of the spectrum. Whereas the poor struggle even to obtain water for essential daily needs, rich and the prosperous are blatantly misusing the precious underground water. Due to which the inequities, non-availability of clean water accessibilities and

distribution are only widening proliferation of water-borne diseases and illnesses among the poor, adding to their plight. In a shocking revelation,

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 7,83,000 die every year in India due to water-related diseases. In this, India stands much lower than its neighbouring smaller countries like Sri Lanka and Maldives. Despite this, there is neither any awareness nor any effort underway to rectify the situation.

The upkeep and maintenance of natural water bodies such as ponds and lakes remains poor, many of which are now mere garbage dumps, which also affects the ground water quality. On the other hand is the spectre of drying rivers which are being filled with industrial effluents and city waste threatening its very existence? Due to this continued trash disposal, the water sources along the rivers have been found to be more polluted. The big Companies doing water business by extracting underground water are raking in big money at the cost of the livelihood and the life of the poor. Apart from imbalancing the availability of water due to this water drain, the poor is the most hit by the aggravating crisis in terms of life, food, health and education. In view of this brazen exploitation of the vital resource of the poor, a water rights legislation is an absolute must.

Only a water security legislation assuring each Indian his right to water will assure a life of dignity to the vulnerable Indian populace which is subject to varied discriminations. It has been estimated that by 2030 the gap between supply and demand of water will widen manifold. To prevent such a situation each person from now itself should work towards water conservation and its management. Demand for water, a diminishing resource, is constantly on the rise both for farming and industry and will only increase in the days to come. In such a scenario a judicious use of water and its conservation for fair distribution to all as well as ensuring its availability for the coming generations is called for. Towards this, the enactment of Water rights legislation both by the Centre and the State could go a long way in assuring water to all as well as easing the burdens of life revolving around water, especially of women.

Sanjay Singh

Secretary,
Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan

Changing the landscape- Empowered women together seek water and rights

● Ritambhara Shastri

From mere silent water loader and householder she has taken massive strides to step out and become a societal pivot with a voice that is now heard. These are not lone voices but voices of collectivity the Jal Sahelis-that now have become emphatic after all that they have achieved not just on the water front but in several areas of livelihood, education, health and hygiene in each of their villages at the local level. And these voices know how to make themselves heard right upto the district level with screaming, shouting and even singing if need be. They have moved and nudged officials out of their complacency and indifference and compelled them to intervene to set their small world in order. And it all happened because they are grouped as Jal Sahelis, water friends, an innovative women's agency that has empowered them at all levels over the past four years that they have been in existence.

The ghunghat covering women's faces are still in place for many but the voices coming from behind the veils now come out stronger, are more affirmative and are yielding results for all to see. It is not only water that has been brought closer to the people in villages and habitats making life that much less arduous for women but their strong footing has given them a lot more. In fact they have been transformed into leaders who now take up not only water but all issues related to their villages be it of work, livelihood, health or hygiene.

The struggle has been long and hard entailing raising a collective



voice, fighting for their rights and entitlements, rotesting over injustices, and most important realizing that it is possible to get your due instead of standing haplessly just consigning yourself to your destiny in the parched and water-deficient Bundelkhand villages. All they needed was a bit of hand holding and guidance provided by the Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan (PSSS), a local voluntary organization rooted in the region, to come into their own all across the 96 villages spread in the three districts of Lalitpur, Hamirpur and Jalaun. It received support from the European Union from 2011 and strengthened its network and outreach to launch initiatives to empower the marginalized communities bringing the women in the forefront. Moving on the essential premise of the 'Establishing Women's First Right to Water Resources', many villages in these areas have seen transformations that have made the lives of women and children less tedious giving them not only water but the realization that they themselves can be the vehicles of change, if shown the

way. A travel through these villages gave an insight into their lives and conditions. For instance, women in villages of Talbehat have over the years gained so much not only on the water issue but also on several related issues of seeking work and employment as their right. In Kalhotra a relocated village of mainly women and children as most men have migrated, women have many valour stories to narrate about their struggles to get work under MGNREGA despite stiff resistance.

Ram Pyari instead of a Jal Saheli, said they were first refused work and when they insisted they were given tasks which were tough, much worse than those given to men also, in the hope that they would give up. No family members were allowed to work knowing that they would come out to ease their burden. They went about it collectively and it was the officer who had to ultimately give up in resisting them, they said. That was an instance of their collective efforts, strong bargaining, protest and sticking to their ground, something they have learnt

over these past four years ever since they aligned with Parmarth.

In Chandrapur, a village block of Talbehat in district Lalitpur was better off and water sufficient. More men were visible as there was less migration from this village due to better living conditions—more water, more agriculture. The girls were going to school long distance in a taxi, they had their own land, more cattle, said Jal Saheli Pushpa. A village of nearly 200 families, joint efforts of Pani Panchayat members and Jal Sahelis had ensured repairing of the wells, installing of operational hand pumps 10-12 toilets, because of which the happiness quotient too was more apparent here. Articulate and happy about their own land and its yield, even though rain-affected, the cattle and the water access, the women, however, preferred to keep their heads covered with colourful sarees in the presence of male family members.

In the village of Malhanpur in Jalaun inhabited mostly by weavers, the women had many experiences to narrate. A village of 295 houses had 25 hand pumps and 70 toilets, mostly private, for each of which they had to struggle. Seeking their right under the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, they had to make many trips to the district office, 65 km away. When not heard, the women would take recourse to singing meaningful songs on their travails which eventually moved the administration. Among the enthusiastic singers were Jal Sahelis



Laungshri and Somwati who possessed the innate ability to come out with on-the-spot lyrics. Narrating their struggles, they said they had also protested against the inferior material used in school construction and did not budge till it was rectified. A village without any electricity they also had to struggle to get their quota of 2.5 litre of kerosene oil under the BPL card to enable their children to study at night.

In Sareela village in Hamirpur most houses were locked as the entire populace was out in the fields to retrieve whatever they could of their crop damaged by the recent unseasonal rains. Many were away to the Jal Saheli convention in Jhansi to mark the World Water Day. There also was a stark segregation among the dalits and the

upper class that had better access to water and better cleanliness. Despite improvement of many roads under the Pradhan Mantri Sadak Yojna, the villagers complained about the lack of toilet facilities which inconvenienced the women, raising issues of health, security and dignity.

This was one issue where they had not made much of headway due to various road blocks. Haidelpura, a village of 226 houses had 80 toilets, a far cry from not having any. But in most of the 19 hand pumps, the quality of water was not good, Jal Sahelis Rammurti Devi and Sharda said. Admitting that caste discriminations were now much less, they said whatever they have achieved has come through persistent struggles. For instance the filthy pond near the village school was cleaned through MNREGA work after many efforts.

The untimely rains in April and damage of the standing crop was the all-important worry of all across all the villages putting a big question mark on their future. Sceptical of government help or compensation, they saw a bleak future but still had not given up on hope knowing they had so many of their didis and bhaiyas, a term used for the ever present Parmarth workers, in whom they reposed much trust and hope. "They will help us tide over this crisis too", was the common refrain, a view emanating from the years of faith reinforced by the progressive gains and upliftment of their lives from the morass that it was in just a few years

Senior Journalist (New Delhi)

From PARMARTH desk:

There are multiple dimensions of water rights, which specify the water content claim, right to use water, to construct water bodies, operate and maintain schemes and initiatives, to decide on schemes and represent on these at various forums.

Over the past four years Parmarth has been actively engaged at the ground level in the pursuit of Women's First Right to Water Resources. The network of Jal sahelis spread in the 96 villages of the districts of Hamirpur, Lalitpur and Jalaun in Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh, together with the established pillar of Pani Panchayats have been challenging the local authorities and elected representatives demanding safe and secure water for domestic consumption and livelihood.

The initiatives have paid off with many victories but the struggle initiated by the Jal Saheli "as a women agency" has to still travel a long road to achieve their goal of 'Women's First Right to Water Resource.

Many struggles but walking with strength of hope: Reviving lakes and ponds:



In parched and dry Bundelkhand daily lives revolve around water its acquisition, its preservation, its recycling, and its continued procurement. Each and every water body matters and they have to ensure the maximum utilization of its water for various needs. It is therefore the lakes and ponds of Bundelkhand which had been the central nerve of water bodies in the region providing sustenance to its people over the years. Some of the lakes and ponds have dried up or they have turned into garbage dumps mainly due to administrative neglect and community's apathy. The Jal Sahelis, the innovative local women's agency, based in different villages seized this opportunity, organised themselves to take up the onerous task to redevelop and revive the worst polluted water bodies of Sharamdaan, Dharampur, Matan and Rehanian lakes and ponds in their respective villages to ensure that water sources are available throughout the year for multipurpose water usage. The Jal Saheli women—Kunti Devi, Kamlesh Kumari, Lalita Devi, Sudharani, Archana Parvati, Sarojdevi and Manju Lata who took a lead role in organizing community women and Pani Panchayat members also stressed the need for women's leadership and effective participation in water management and decision-making at all levels. This includes water and food security, efficiency on water use, pollution reduction and protection of ecosystems in the region.

Water recycle and multipurpose usage: Vegetable bounty

Village Sopta in Madhogarh block was like any other—just bare houses with goats and cattle roaming the narrow roads. They still do now they have also have pastures of greenery with rows and patches of green vegetables and spices. With effort from Jal Saheli and their gained knowledge sharing the households in the village are engaged in growing varieties of seasonal vegetables in their piece of homestead kitchen garden land. The households also have been adopting System of Wheat Intensification (SWI) methods by using and diverting the recycled waste water into the vegetable beds. Apart from recycling waste water it also ensures food security and nutrition of themselves and of their families. By growing vegetables they also earn extra income by selling their produce in the village adding to their family income and promoting self-sufficiency.

Pani Panchayats vivid presence and Engagement

The Pani Panchayats, the precursor of Jal Sahelis, alongwith the CBOs have been consistently addressing issues of water scarcity and conservation and have been playing a pivotal role in reviving traditional water bodies in the region. They meet every month to deliberate on the issues and chalk out strategies for long term water availability. In April, 60 of these Panchayats in villages of Hamirpur, Lalitpur and Jalaun met in which more than 700 women were involved. Issues discussed were establishing water bodies, repairing broken handpumps, their reborring and setting up toilets. In Hamirpur women referred to the irregularities in getting the Samajwadi Pension Plan. Violence against women was also taken up. The Panchayat members followed it up by submitting their demands to the Development Officer and to the SDM seeking quick redressal of their problems.



Success of Pani Panchayats

Water bodies under the EU supported project of Women's First Right to Water Resources. New check dams were constructed in Budawani, Chandrapur and Udgaun, a check dam was revived in Thanagaon in Talbehat block of Lalitpur district. A new check dam was constructed in Atrauli village, in Sareela block of Hamirpur district. Reviving and

construction of new check dam is expected to benefit 139 families, and irrigate 332 acres of land, by ensuring water security and conservation throughout the year for domestic, livelihood and food security dimensions.

Apart from the regular and ongoing effort of Pani Panchayat on traditional water conservation methods, they also have been engaged on debating new methods by creating new and more of water conservation bodies, addressing the pressing issue sanitation, construction of toilets under Swachh Bharath Abhiyan, livelihood options and end poverty etc., These efforts are aimed at reaching sustainable solution and strategy to resolve the issues and problems at community level. Pani Panchayat also invest its energy and efforts on sharing information on different centre and State sponsored social benefit schemes, efforts are to advocate and interface with local authorities (at Panchayat, block office and Sub District Magistrate (SDM) through petitions and meetings. The issues are raised on irregularity service delivery in Pension Yojanas (central and State) demanding safety and security of women etc.

World Groundwater Day: Save for future

National Groundwater Awareness week was organized on 10 June, 2015. Series of events were organized in all three districts of EU-supported project areas. The popular awareness campaigns were organized through rallies, public meetings, workshop and poster exhibitions in the villages and district headquarters. The message conveyed was to preserve and conserve water, planting of trees to protect and promote ecological balances. These rallies and meetings were witnessed by the local dignitaries, and they endorsed and pledged to save or conserve water, for multipurpose usage, extended support to setting up of more water bodies in the villages and stressed on promoting rain water harvesting



Do you Know?

A major cause of worry is the depletion of the world's groundwater at an alarming rate. The latest NASA research shows that 21 of the world's 37 largest aquifers - from India, China to USA have passed their sustainability tipping points. This means that more water was removed than replaced over the past decades due to which long term problems are likely to worsen in the days to come. India's groundwater tables too are plunging at an alarming rate with reserves in some states dwindling to critical levels, according to the report from the Central Groundwater Board (CGWB) the apex body under the ministry of water resources. Over 16 per cent of the country's groundwater resources are over exploited and in some states groundwater extraction has reached 100 per cent, which experts say will have huge ramifications for agriculture, livelihoods and the whole economy. In water-deprived Bundelkhand too it is a worrisome situation with 13 water units having slipped into severe and critical water insecure categories.

Technical know how for Jal Sahelies:

Two days technical training skills was imparted to 96 Jal Sahelies on repairing of hand pumps by the local Jal nigam staff in the month of May, 2015 The women who participated in this training came from all three districts - Hamirpur, Jalaun and Lalitpur. Inspired by this initiative Superintendent of District Magistrate, Talbehat, said women's eagerness to learn technical knowhow will yield fruits in the long run, by ensuring water and by upscaling their position and self-esteem. Besides Jal Sahelies regular networking meetings being held in the region the meetings debate and discuss - identifying of non-functional of hand pumps, monitoring of the water bodies for their cleanliness and usage, creation of regular water sources, non-functional schools, demand for school building water and toilet facilities in school, construction of toilet in house hold, other infrastructure facilities, changing pattern climate, agriculture, harvesting with low water consumption produce etc.



Self-motivation and rationale in actions:

Manraul village of Sarila Block in Hamirpur district has the highest population of marginalised communities belonging to Dalits and other most backward communities. Most of the members of the 240 families of the village are small holding agricultural farmers and landless labourers who perennial are migrants. Most work in other districts as unorganized them daily wage labourers in financially and socially exploitative conditions in nearby brick kilns. The village is not only water-deficient, its agriculture land is filled with sludge due to which farming and harvesting is a distant reality. Little can grow on this land and those continuing to stay here live in hunger and poverty. However, the women in the village have not given up and continue to struggle and work hard and evolve innovative ways to somehow make both ends meet with limited available resources. Story of Vimla's self-initiative: 52-year-old Vimla Devi's family owns 10-bighas of agricultural land but is unable to grow



anything on it because of its undulated dry terrain. In 2011 Vimla learnt about PARMARTH's initiative of water conservation and resources and enthusiastically participated in its training and awareness education programmes. Here she gained knowledge on water bodies and conservation. She sought help from Panchayat Pradhan to barricade her land to enable better tilling and irrigation under the MNREGA scheme. But when no help came from the village Panchayat Office even after a long wait

she decided to do it herself. She then painstakingly levelled the entire land and built a 20 metre barricaded wall to prevent water from flowing out. Since then, Vimla has been able to grow crops on the entire 10 bighas. The produce which she obtains from her field is sufficient to take care of her entire family. Vimla's effort and initiatives have paved the way for others to take similar initiatives to build their lives. It has also positioned her better economically and socially in the community.

Less water woes enables more girls to go to school

Sarila, a village of 410 families and a population of 2145, about 500 of whom belong to the Dalit community depends on brackish water drawn from traditional wells of Sareela block. It was the women of the village who trudged more than a kilo metre to get drinking water for their homes. This adversely affected their lives and health and their daughters studies. In 2007 under a drinking water scheme pipelines were laid which brought drinking water to the villagers. However, the scheme failed

barely after a month and the villagers had to revert back to their struggles for water search. The problems were further aggravated due to the low level of water sources, rampant water scarcity with women and girls ending up spending all their time on water collection.

After initiation of EU supported project, women and young girls mobilised and demanded safe and secure water from the local authorities (block to the district) and sought their intervention. But there was no response

from district administration.

A year later the situation was reviewed and after a cost assessment with a contribution sum of Rs. 27,555/- (€405) from Parmarth and Rs. 23, 850/- (€350) contribution from panchayat office, a pipeline of 1720 metre was laid. Presently, the village has access to safe drinking water, leading to a comfortable and a life of less hardship. The young girls in the village are able to attend their school regularly and focus more time and attention to their studies.

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Awards and recognition

Water crusader Anuja Devi honoured

Anuja Devi of Karauti village in Madhogarh Block of Jalaun district was presented the HT Women's Award 2014-15 by Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav and his wife Dimple Yadav, M.P. at a function at the Taj Hotel in Lucknow on May 8, 2015. The award was sponsored by the Hindustan Times.

Anuja Devi received the award for her efforts in rain water conservation in water-deprived Bundelkhand region. Anuja, along with 25 other community women, including Pani Panchayat members revived a dying lake in her village. Impressed by the initiative taken by the women, the village panchayat took further steps to level the lake and restored it to its original water conservation from this, Anuja Devi has played an important role in convincing village women to opt for minimal water crops, organic manure and adopting



IPM technology. She has also taken the lead in creating a collective grain bank to be used during crises for vulnerable and poor families in their time of need.



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