

Managing Watersheds

Successful Cooperation

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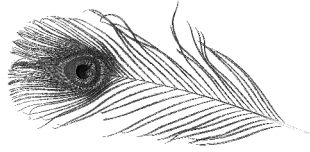
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Managing Watersheds

Successful Cooperation

Watershed management which is fast forming a new blueprint for agricultural development in most parts of the country is today causing a quiet revolution in Bharuch district in Gujarat.

The concept of linking agricultural intensification with soil and moisture conservation and institutional development has the potential to dramatically improve the marginal status of rainfed areas everywhere. An area drained by a river is thus the largest watershed while micro-watersheds are those that are drained by rivulets or streams. Contour bunding planned around such watersheds help conserve water and soil, optimising the use of water resources available in an area in the most economical way and make conventional irrigation systems based on dams quite redundant.

Defective System

In Bharuch, as in most of rural India, conventional irrigation systems were once in vogue which called for the damming of rivers by the Government and the distribution of water through canals laid down expressly for this purpose. While the dam's reservoirs held water, the surrounding villages received no supply for the canal network, as it turned out, was structurally defective and practically

Any development programme needs the active participation of the beneficiaries to ensure its success. Prithi Nambiar writes about one experiment in Bharuch district in Gujarat which embodies the spirit of the cooperative movement.

unusable. And so, Bharuch district with its predominantly backward tribal population continued until recently to rely on a single cropping system made possible by 900 mm. of rain received almost entirely during the monsoon. This situation is particularly ironic in view of the fact that the area is veined by various tributaries of the Narmada and the Tapti.

The tribals of Bharuch rarely own more than five acres of land. Most often they are landless and serve as agricultural labour or move to urban areas to work on construction sites or wherever opportunities for casual labour exist as in diamond cutting centres and stone quarries.

The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) has undertaken to graft a blueprint for integrated development into the tribal dominated belt of Bharuch district which is considered one of the most backward pockets in Gujarat. The scope of the programme consequently includes water resource development, wasteland development, soil and water conservation, agricultural extension, bio-gas plants and savings/credit schemes. All programmes work entirely through mass participation with particular emphasis on the involvement of women. All activities are integrated around the villages that make up a particular micro-watershed.

The nerve centre of a watershed development programme is the village institution without which coordination and implementation is an impossible task. In the past, voluntary organisations had implemented development projects by circumventing institutions and functioning as activity centres for the duration of the project. While there seemed to be ample justification for such a course of action in situations where local institutions did not exist – or where they did, were dysfunctional, faction-ridden or just plain corrupt – the problem arose when the project came to an end. The village would revert to status quo ante simply because the absence of a management mechanism ruled out the successful

internalisation of any development experiment. The revitalization of the village institution has now become an important part of the agenda of many voluntary groups working in rural areas.

Mandals Activated

So the Gram Vikas Mandals (GVM) have been activated in the villages by the AKRSP and provided training in basic administrative skills such as book keeping, accounting and management. The GVM thus accesses a variety of programmes and schemes for the benefit of the entire village. It serves as a nodal facility to coordinate credit, agricultural input supply, marketing and various other functions which help maximise the utility of available resources for the entire community. AKRSP encourages villages to form different types of societies based on their functional requirements such as Lift Irrigation Societies, Tree Growers' Cooperative Societies (TGCS), Mahila Vikas Mandals or Canal Cooperative Societies (CCS). Most villages could have more than one society.

Umesh Desai of AKRSP at Netrang, Bharuch district, says that development intervention in the form of creating physical infrastructure, along with organising farmers in each watershed area into irrigation cooperative societies, has been rewarding work. One of the reasons could be the remoteness of the villages here from mainstream life. "The roads are so bad," says Umesh, "that even politicians are kept at bay! So we have a set of people here who are quite unaffected by the cynicism of modern times and consequently quite open and enthusiastic about trying new ways of doing things." As the jeep grinds and bumps its way along the mere semblance of a road, rising dust masks fields of spiked millet, pigeon pea and cotton along the undulating landscape of the area. At one point where the road disappears, the jeep drives through a stream charting its own course thereafter to the tiny tribal hamlet of Ronda where a monthly meeting of the GVM is underway.

Among the villagers attending the meeting is Phoolsingh Bhai, a visitor from the village of Khedipada, not far from Ronda. Our friends from AKRSP tell us that Khedipada has made a mark in the field of rural cooperative management. They tell us about the Jivan Jyot Cooperative. The Jivan Jyot irrigation society is a society with a difference. The 1,500 residents of Khedipada have, it appears, successfully demonstrated the true potential of the cooperative

system. This society was formed around a groupwell by nine enterprising farmers of Khedipada in 1992 in order to access the Jeevan Dhara finance scheme of the DRDA for the purchase of pipelines and pumpsets that would make irrigation operational. The AKRSP actively helped the villagers register the society. Over seven acres of the area under groundnut and 15 acres of the area under green gram are currently irrigated by the groupwell.

Guarding the Forest

The success of the groupwell spurred the formation of a Tree Growers' Cooperative Society in Khedipada in 1993 with 190 members. Khedipada has wholeheartedly adopted joint forest management, greening thirty hectares of forest land in 1990 and another five hectares of revenue land in 1991. Its GVM organises protection of the forests by rota. Any inmate from a designated house is expected to patrol the forests on the day he finds a stick placed at his doorstep and this turn is noted on the daily register. Anyone found guilty of violating the rules and harvesting forest produce is judged and penalised by the GVM. Outsiders are fined rather more heavily.

Talking to the villagers, we gathered that Khedipada had managed several impressive accomplishments. For one thing, credit recovery in the village stands at a 100 per cent. Mahila mandals run compulsory savings schemes with a contribution of Rs. 10-20 every month. Practically every household in the village sends one woman member to the mandal. This GVM has undertaken the marketing of cotton, the chief commercial crop in the area, on a cooperative basis since 1991.

Rupsingh Bhai, who heads the mandal, points out that this village is the only one that has started off with an irrigation scheme based on just a groupwell. Sitting in his spartan home, brilliant red chillies blazing on the roof where they have been laid to dry, Rupsingh appears quite satisfied with the progress made so far. "Nothing is of course possible without good leadership," he says modestly. "We are able to resolve most issues among ourselves." Successful contour bunding has directly increased the productivity of the soil.

Rupsingh and other villagers say that agricultural production has since increased by a third of previous levels. Villagers have now begun to invest in livestock and the mandal has moved on to support a milk cooperative.

The dairy cooperative helped villagers acquire 53 buffaloes in the very first year of its existence. Today, the dairy has 101 buffaloes. Trucks lift the daily supply of milk and carry it to the chilling plant. Khedipada's 220 children go to a primary school. "We have teachers who come in from other neighbouring villages. But our dispensary has no doctor," says Rupsingh.

Khedipada is growing from strength to strength. The mandal meets the credit requirements of its members. Encouraged by the fact that credit recovery on loans totalling Rs. 25,000 in 1990 was a 100 per cent, the mandal has disbursed Rs. 80,000 this year to finance the seed and livestock requirements of 114 villagers.

Small wonder then that Khedipada, which continues to remain quite unmoved by the remarkable progress made in these few years, is upheld as an example to all other surrounding villages. At the meeting in Ronda, Suresh Patel exhorts the villagers to visit Khedipada. "Go see for yourself what Khedipada is doing to help itself," he says.

The Ronda meeting is an important one. Will the villagers decide to follow in Khedipada's footsteps? Suresh and other AKRSP volunteers tease, persuade and cajole the villagers into taking decisions that could change their lives. It is a difficult job. "Sisters," they ask of the women sitting in contained excitement, heads covered and silent, "what do you think? Isn't it easier for all of you to get your marketing done collectively? You could hire a tempo, sell a larger amount, get a better price and reduce your costs."

"But what about the fun we have going to the market, dressing up, visiting; there won't be any of that if the mandal does the marketing," says one of the women and there is general laughter all around. "What do you think?" The volunteers turn to another woman. "Let the men decide," she says, her voice muffled by her

pallav. “But why can’t you?” persists Suresh, “After all, who does the work around here?” He turns to the men. “Who picks the cotton,” he asks. “The women,” say the men. “Who carts it off the fields?” “The women,” say the men a little reluctantly. “Who does the marketing?” “We do it together,” comes the answer.

Cautious Moves

Within no time Ronda has also committed itself to raising contributions of about Rs. 20,000 towards an irrigation scheme that will lift water from the river. AKRSP is now committed to making the project a reality for this village.

But every move is made with caution: “We never take up any infrastructural activity with any group till they have been saving and meeting regularly for at least six months. This is what we call a maturity criterion which we are very strict about,” says Umesh. “The willingness of the villagers to invest own resources,” adds Manish Varma of AKRSP, “is always a clear demonstration of commitment to the project at hand.”

AKRSP members feel that lift irrigation schemes have immense potential in the region because of the low level of investment required and the general availability of water in the area.

Bharuch district is comparatively fortunate. The sense of despair in villages in other rainfed areas that are not networked by rivers can be quite pervasive. Development Alternatives is working in Tumkur district in Karnataka on similar watershed development schemes seeking once again to route them through GVMs. Although awareness levels in this area are high and village leaders are articulate and well-informed, there is a lot of cynicism along with a sense of helplessness. Umesh Desai’s point about the isolation of the remarkable little villages of Bharuch is particularly striking.

The villages surrounding Tumkur are semi-urban and the village Pramukh raves about the relationship between deforestation and poor water retention. But what to do without rain,” he asks. “What

to do about encroachment?” “But who destroyed the forests,” asks a visiting development worker archly. “Oh, it’s us and our forefathers.” shrugs the village headman. “We all know that, but what can we do without funds, without power, without anything?” The problem seems largely attitudinal. The catalytic role played by voluntary groups is quite clearly a critical factor in the adoption of new technologies and management systems.

Centre for Environment Education

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