

India's village women fight to protect water

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by T Jahnavi

"When there is water scarcity, women are worst affected," says Santokben Lakhabhai Kamaria from Gujarat. She is one of 1500 village women who travelled to Bheekampura village in Alwar, Rajasthan, western India, to discuss ways of protecting water supplies in rural India.

"When there is no water in the villages, no crops grow. Men migrate to the cities for work and women are left to fend for themselves, their children, old members of the family and their cattle," explains Santokben.



Over 1500 village women gathered at the water conference in Alwar, Rajasthan.
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She was speaking at the National Women's Water Conference in February 2003, organised by Tarun Bharat Sangh, an NGO working to conserve traditional water systems in Rajasthan's villages. The meeting focused on the role of women in water management and how control over water can empower them.

Instead of spending hours fetching water from far off places, the women know that the time could be better spent learning the alphabet, taking better care of children and their own health and engaging in community work.

No water, no milk



Sarabai, a gutsy woman from Kutchh, in Gujarat, described the crisis women face when there is no water. "There is no income for women. In our part of the world, the income from the sale of milk and ghee (clarified butter) goes to women directly. The family gets nourishing food and financial security during other crises. But when there is no water, there is no fodder for the animals, and there is no milk. Men go to the city and the abandoned women have to go to far off, strange places to get work. At work they are often exploited and harassed."

Maldhari women carrying water near Sasan Gir Gujarat, India.
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The event brought together rural women from 12 Indian states, many of them had never travelled out of their villages or held microphones, in their hand. But in Beekampura the women took centre stage.

75-year-old Muttama from Tamil Nadu spoke of how the replacement of traditional water tanks with modern conservation systems disempowered women in her village. The traditional tanks gave women more time to do other things. Once they fell into disuse, women spent most of their time collecting water. "Today we have organised ourselves to revive these tanks.

Twenty-five per cent of the labour for reviving these reservoirs comes from women. "There is water underground and greenery over ground wherever we work," says a proud Muttama.

Building check dams

Budhna, a tribal woman from Orissa, eastern India, described how the women of her village and neighbouring villages fought to reforest a hillock to prevent soil erosion and conserve water. "We watered every sapling once a week. Just when the saplings were beginning to grow, a contractor came along to cut down the older trees. The women took him to the police, who initially refused to file a report, but when the women threatened to report the matter to the Prime Minister, they complied. The contractor never returned to the village."

Santabai from Madhya Pradesh, central India, who has helped revive old silted tanks and ponds in her village says, "These things work better with women. Our men have got used to blaming the government and running to the liquor sellers whenever the going gets tough. Women suffer violence at home and yet work with determination." She adds, "Men and governments have done enough damage. Now they should move over and let women set things right."

Another water conservation enthusiast, Shantaben, from Dador, Gujarat, formed an organisation of women and built check dams, revived old ponds and even procured a solar pump to pump water to other villages. In the same state, Santokben, who otherwise appears very shy, very effectively led women of Seriaj village in solving their water shortage. With support from other NGOs, the women learnt to build water-harvesting systems in every neighbourhood. Today, despite drought in several villages, Seriaj homes have enough stored water.

Water harvesting

Sharing his 20-year struggle - to green parts of desert Rajasthan through water harvesting - Ramon Magasaysay award winner Rajendra Singh says, "To solve the country's water problem, we have to first recharge the earth's own resource. Women play an important role here." Singh believes water conservation furthers community development. "When we started work in this area, boys and girls did not go to school. Today, even the girls go to school and you can see how they express themselves."

Voicing opposition against male control over water management, some of the women said: "We are involved in bringing water from far off places, using it for cooking, cleaning, washing, and feeding animals. But when it comes to taking decisions on water management, we are nowhere."

The women are equally critical of the recently constituted National Water Policy, which proposed privatisation of water bodies. "How can a river belong to anyone? Water is needed not just by humans but also by animals and trees," states Budhna. "If the tiger comes to drink, will you tell it not to? It will eat you first and then drink!"

The women at the conference resolved to fight tooth and nail to protect water. "We will take our sticks and chase out those who attempt to sell our water to us," declared a young Rajasthani bride.

Even young girls appeared determined to change life in their villages. Sita Munia, a 17-year-old from Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh, attempts to convince her conservative village men that women be given charge of water conservation. "I haven't succeeded yet but I will keep trying," says Sita.

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