

Reclaiming Lost Power

Saurashtrians Resolve to Make Their Villages Water Sufficient

○ Madhu Kishwar

THE drought that actually occurred last year but hit the headlines this year brought into sharp focus the gross mismanagement of natural resources in India due to malgovernance, inefficiency and corruption. We have all been saturated with those depressing stories coming to us through the mass media which itself woke up too late to the coming crisis. However, the good news is that there is a new ferment all over the country with many people declaring: "No more of crippling dependence on the government." Citizens are beginning to explore ways of taking charge of their own environment, and expecting the government to either leave them alone or play a supportive role rather than act the tyrannical lord.

Not surprisingly, such community initiatives are getting institutionalised in rural areas far more rapidly than in metropolitan cities. Because our villages have been far more callously neglected than urban centres, it has become a matter of life and death for the rural population to regain control over their own lives.

In this issue, we introduce our readers to one such important initiative from Gujarat where one individual managed to galvanise a whole community into collective action to combat droughts, and water scarcity. From the signs of it, this is having a powerful ripple effect in many other areas of life too.

MATHURBHAI Savani, of the Patel community, comes from village Khopala, Taluka Gadhada, in Bhavnagar district of Gujarat. His family used to own a total of 13 bighas of land. Like many other men from his drought-prone village, he left home a little over twenty years ago in search of a better living. This 38 year old was then still in his teens. He began by taking a job as a low-paid worker in the diamond polishing industry of Surat. Though Mathurbhai had only studied up to Class V, he had inherited the enterprising spirit of his community. So within a few years he set up his own small diamond business which quickly prospered. Soon he brought three of his brothers from the village to join him in expanding it. Currently, his polished diamond exports to Europe are worth

more than Rs 100 crores a year. He attributes his success to both hard work and good luck. The diamond polishing trade is dominated by his Patel community from the drought-prone regions of Gujarat. Virtually all those who are now the leading figures in the trade began as manual workers and

slowly gained enough expertise to establish their own businesses.

Apart from their enterprise, the Patels from this region are famous for being a closely-knit community. Even after they migrate to far away countries, they tend to keep in close contact with their villages. Abroad, they are known to devise new institutions and associations for reinforcing their ties with one another, even when they get thinly spread out over a large continent like North America.

Concerned but Helpless

Like many others of his community, even after he became a successful diamond merchant, Mathurbhai regularly visited his village for one month every year at Diwali time for a family reunion. From his elders he had

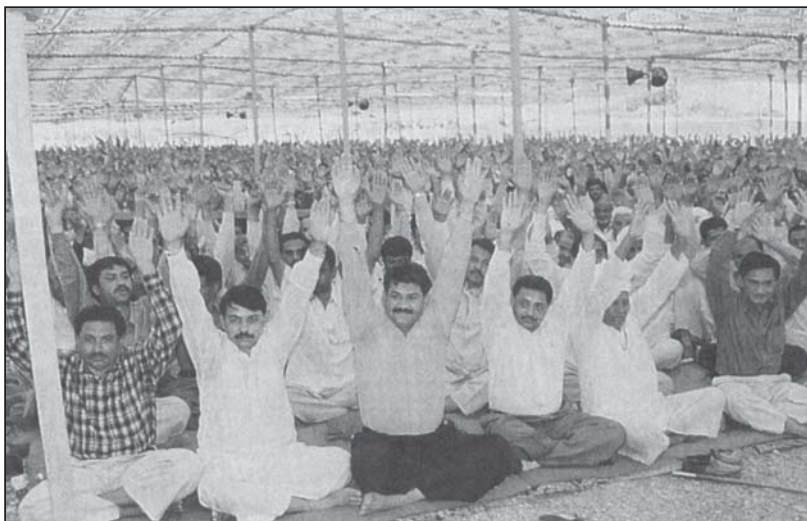


**Mathurbhai Savani Speaking
at a conference.**

heard that their village had a plentiful water supply until about forty years ago. The water table used to be fairly high, so that even in the summer months there was no shortage of drinking water.

The crisis began when a number of households in the village used the urban earnings of their sons to sink electric powered bore-wells and began drawing ground water for irrigation without recharging the depleting supply by water reharvesting. Earlier, in keeping with the topography and scarcity of rainwater, these areas used to grow coarse grains and other such crops that require small amounts of rainwater and that would yield some output even during droughts. But with the tube-wells making it possible to draw huge quantities of water, crops requiring regular irrigation began to be cultivated. As a consequence, the aquifers below ground were eventually depleted and the water table went down so far that even drinking water became hard to obtain.

His awareness of water scarcity in the village never left Mathurbhai because he would experience it afresh every year. He was concerned about the rest of his kin who remained in the village and wanted to help find a solution to the water shortage. The sight of women trudging long distances for small amounts of drinking water, and repeated crop failures, kept troubling him. But it took a long time before he decided to translate his concerns into action. At first, he did not know where to begin. The culture of dependence on the *mai-baap sarkar* had become ingrained in the area. The government had promised people in these drought infested regions that the state would bring them water as a result of building this or that big dam.



Yes, to self help: A public meeting of the Saurashtra Jaldhara Trust.

But those promises of new sources of water never materialised.

Rajsamdhiala Inspires

Then Mathurbhai heard that village Rajsamdhiala in Rajkot district had solved its water problem several years earlier. He was told that the water works maintained by the people of this village had converted their dry region into a lush green zone. Inspired by such accounts, Mathurbhai and his close friends arranged for 150 people from Khopala to go and see for themselves how this miracle had been achieved.* That was in early 1998.

They came back very inspired from that trip and soon after their return, they formed a committee in their village to combat the water scarcity. This was followed by a large meeting of people from the village who had settled down in Surat in the diamond and other businesses. The Patel network proved extremely useful in giving momentum to the work of water harvesting. Yet, Mathurbhai

* In the next issue of MANUSHI we hope to carry a detailed account of how this transformation originated in Rajsamdhiala village.

and his colleagues were determined to follow Rajsamdhiala example by involving every community in the effort.

Eighty per cent of the approximately 5,000 residents of Khopala village are Patels. Harijans, Brahmins, Rabaris and other communities in the village add up to no more than 20 per cent of the population. To make their work really inclusive, the committee included even non-farming families. Mathurbhai explains how they went about making this committee truly representative: "In our villages, 40-50 families of a particular *jati* constitute a *kutumb* (kinship group). We told them to select one young man from each such *kutumb* to represent them in the village committee."

The village has a total cultivated area of 16,000 bighas. The committee decided to levy Rs 200 per bigha from each family. That totalled to 32 lakh rupees for use as a common fund. Those from the village who had built businesses in Surat added one crore rupees to the fund. In order to ensure the active participation of women, a separate special purpose Mahila Mandal was

also formed. Today the Mahila Mandalhas 1,100 members.

All Through *Shramdaan*

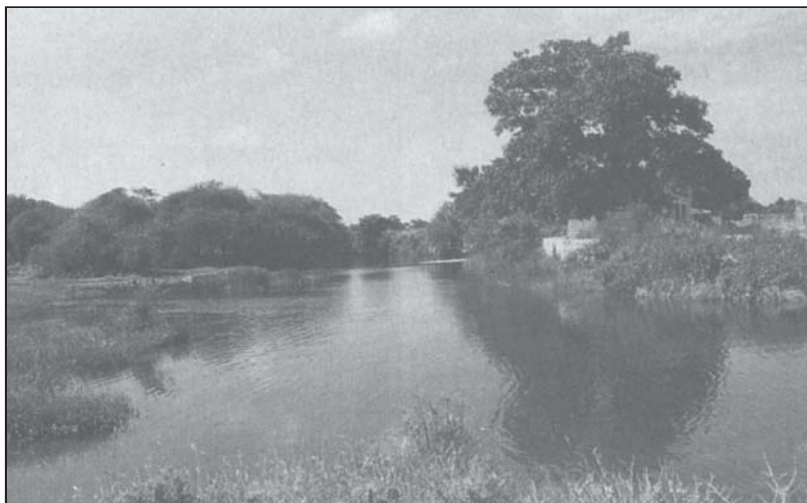
Within six months, after carefully charting out and agreeing upon the best prospects for water harvesting in the village, they constructed about 200 check-dams and ten ponds. They also built 22 channels around the village leading in all principal directions and about 200 structures interlinking the channels. The total length of these channels is 58 kilometers.

All this work was done through *shramdaan* - that is voluntary, unpaid labour contributed by the villagers themselves. Non-farmers in the village contributed by digging up one big village pond. A penalty of Rs 50 per person was assessed for each day that people were absent from their assigned communal work. The fines derived from these penalties added up to Rs 20,000.

After the first rainfall last year, all their check-dams were filled. By the end of that week all the approximately 550 village wells had been recharged and the water level had risen between 20 and 50 feet. Earlier, the wells were all completely dry. The benefits to the villagers were rapid and substantial. At a time when most regions of Gujarat have experienced severe drought and resulting crop failures, village Khopala has no scarcity - neither of water nor of crops. In fact, output increased dramatically. The village sold agricultural products worth 5.44 crores this year. Earlier, they could achieve such incomes only in years of good rainfall. During the years of poor rainfall, the agricultural output would be worth less than one crore rupees.

From Khopala to Saurashtra

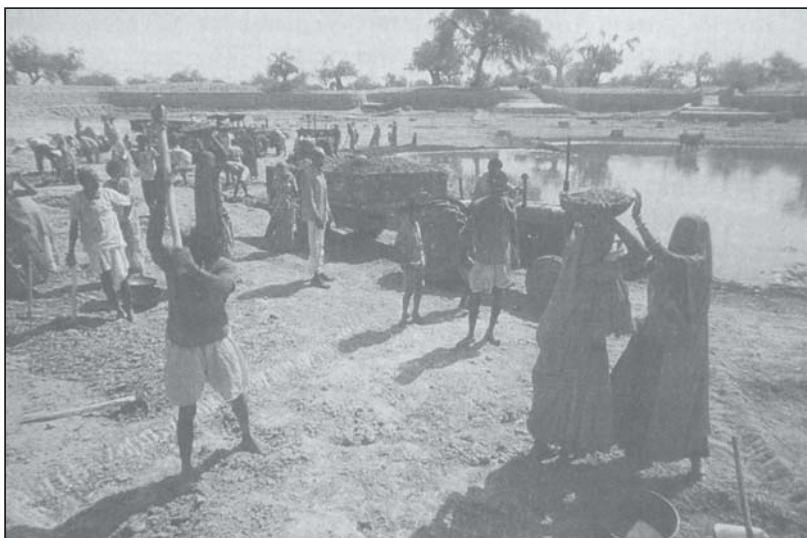
But Mathurbhai was not content with solving the problem in his own village. The success of Khopala led



The regreened and water rich Rajsamdhiala village which inspired similar work in Saurashtra.

him to take on an even more ambitious project. By this time, he had also come to hear about a much larger scale work of Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) in Alwar district of Rajasthan. The Tarun Bharat Sangh had acted as a catalyst in promoting water harvesting in scores of villages. This effort led to the recharging of numerous wells and *johads* (ponds) but also given new life to five completely dead rivers, like the Aravari. These had dried up and disappeared decades ago. In addition, TBS had succeeded in

regreening nearly 250 sq. km. area of land. All this had reportedly contributed to substantial increases in agricultural production and milk yields. So Mathurbhai decided to take his team to go and personally study the work of TBS in order to figure out the dynamics of promoting this work on a macro scale. After having redeemed the pride of their village, now they were ready to redeem their pride as Saurashtrians and take on the task of making the entire region water sufficient.



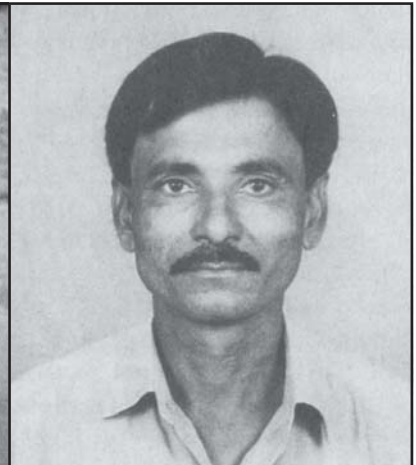
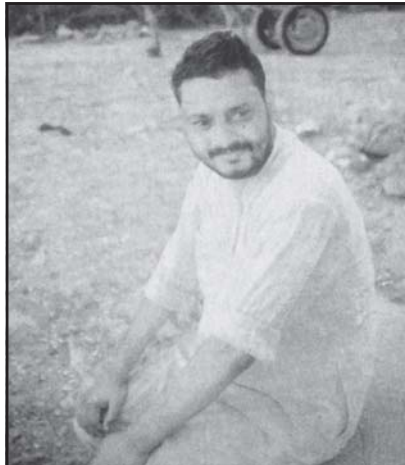
Men and women join *shramdaan* to make water harvesting structures.

The team came back from Alwar really inspired. Mathurbhai then called a combined meeting of the diamond merchants of Surat, Bhavnagar and Ahmedabad, at which he presented an account of the large benefits enjoyed by his village Khopala, the Rajkot village Rajsamdhiala and the Alwar region of Rajasthan - all on the basis of their organised and sustained water harvesting and greening activities. That led to a much larger citizens' initiative and the formation of Saurashtra Jaldhara Trust around November 1999. The Trust organised a 325 kilometer *longpadyatra* of 400 people that traversed through numerous villages of Saurashtra, generating a great deal of enthusiasm for water harvesting and greening.

Impressed by this and similar drought-combat schemes being undertaken by citizens, the Chief Minister of Gujarat announced that any village which could raise 40 per cent of the funds required for a water-harvesting scheme would get the remaining 60 per cent from the government. The Saurashtra Jaldhara Trust has entered into this partnership on a large scale. Since they represent the organised might of the Patel community, they have been able to ensure that the 60 per cent of the funds contributed by the government are reaching the village committees directly and the construction work is undertaken by the villagers themselves rather than through bureaucrats and contractors. In all such cases the work has moved much faster, has cost much less and is of far better quality.

Government Proves Inept

But in most of those cases where the government took charge of the construction work, the results are shoddy. To quote from a report by Mark Tully who compared the outcome of people managed projects vs



Rajendra Singh of Tarun Bharat left and Hardev Sinh Jadeja of Rajsamdhiala whose work inspired many.

government executed projects.

“One of the less encouraging occasions of my visit was a discussion in the ice-cold VVIP bedroom of the Junagadh Circuit House between BJP workers and the minister appointed to look after the district. The party workers, who had no interest in condemning their own government, said that of the nine dams they had inspected eight were ‘of inferior quality, with very little concrete.’ The villain of the piece was inevitably the contractor. The workers all agreed that where the dams were built by villagers themselves there was no problem. Later, I went with the BJP workers to inspect a dam under construction just outside the Gir

sanctuary. A labourer was plastering a thin sheet of concrete over a construction of mud and stones, whereas the dam should have been entirely concrete... Dams that collapse or leak will also undermine villagers’ faith in water harvesting, and everyone I met in Gujarat, including politicians and officials, believed that they held the key to replenishing the underground water table...”

And yet, the government functionaries cannot control their greed or overcome their inefficiency to perform this task efficiently.

When People are In-charge

However, the water harvesting schemes undertaken by Mathurbhai’s Saurashtra Jaldhara Trust are ensuring high quality work because they have taken measures to get each village to take the responsibility for the construction of its own check-dams and ponds. Already, intensive water harvesting and reforestation work has taken off in about 250 villages in Saurashtra, out of a total of about 4,800. The standard the Trust seeks to achieve is “Khopala quality” - defined as work so perfect that even one drop of rainwater is not allowed to escape harvesting. In each such village they

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are constructing a minimum of 40 to a maximum of 400 check-dams, depending on the specific size, population and topography of each location.

In approximately another 1,000 villages, less thorough work involving one to 20 check-dams is already under way. They are still able to call upon Surat merchants to contribute a large share to help subsidise the village work because of the emotional bonds these people have with their villages. Among other things, the Trust provides free cement for all the water works.

The Jaladhara Trust has already enrolled three lakh members. Mathurbhai is its Chairman. Most of the fund-raising campaigns are implemented by young people. Mathurbhai feels the older people, who have lived through long periods of economic distress, don't part with money for this project as readily as young people, who are more open to new ideas and are more generous.

The Mahila Mandal has demonstrated a great deal of enthusiasm for these projects. Women also come for *shramdaan* in large numbers - not just village women, but also women from city-based families take active part.

Reinforcing Village Solidarity

The Jaladhara Trust regularly mobilises people through *padyatras* and *mahasammelans*. Mathurbhai and his colleagues have been pleasantly surprised to find that joint work on water reharvesting has reinvigorated the eroded unity of the villages. Many old animosities are getting dissolved as people join together for this work, which villagers view as a quasi sacred activity.

Rajendra Singh of Tarun Bharat Sangh, who accompanied *apadyatm* of the Jaladhara Trust, observed that

many instances of intrafamily conflicts and fragmentation in the village have been arrested and caste and status differences are being bridged spontaneously through the *jaldhara abhiyan*. He narrated a couple of instances from his own experience.

For example, when they reached a village called Dahesara, which has many high status Durbar Patel families, the *yatra* leader asked Rajendra Singh to take the lead in approaching that particular community. Rajendra was surprised why he, an outsider, was asked to take the lead. The villagers explained that there was a long history of animosity between Durbar Rajputs and other Patels over some land dispute, which years ago had resulted in the murder of eleven people.

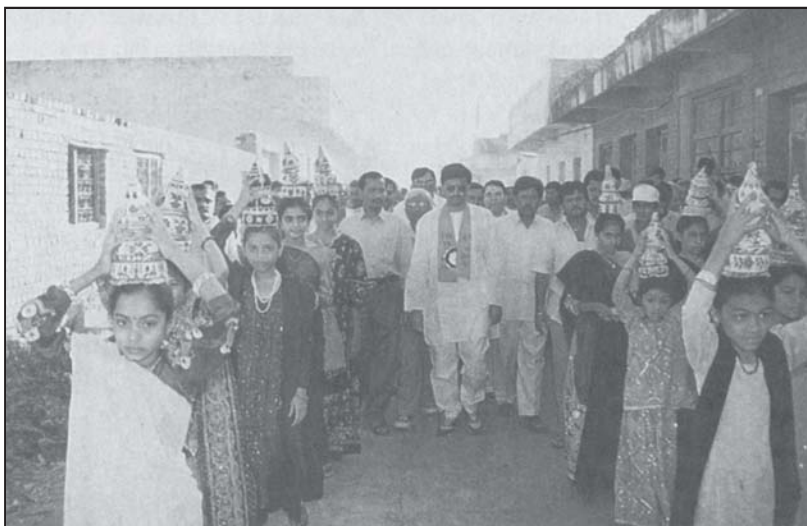
The Patels wanted to end the animosity with the Durbar Rajputs and resume social interaction, using this *pani yatra* as a means to overcome the old animosity. There was a legal case related to the dispute that had dragged on for years in the law courts without any resolution. Rajendra Singh was asked to facilitate this process of reconciliation because the

villagers felt that if he went with them and asked the Durbars to participate in the work, they would hesitate to rebuff him because that would amount to insulting a respected guest of the village. Though unsure of the result, Singh agreed to accompany them and try out their strategy. He was happy to see that the atmosphere between the old enemies remained cordial throughout his visit. This became the beginning of a real thaw between the two groups.

In another instance, in a different village, during the course of a village meeting, the Durbars and Patels called for the joint cooperation of two warring families who had a murder case going on between them for over a decade. Both families were prevailed upon to resolve their conflict. They took an oath not only to withdraw the court cases but also to bury their enmity.

Bridging Rich Poor Divide

In Vikalia village in Bhavnagar district the village leaders asked Rajendra Singh to go and personally visit the house of a Barvad caste woman to thank her for contributing Rs. 11,000 from her meagre savings to the work.



Mathurbhai leading a *padyatra*.

Rajendra was surprised that she was being singled out until he heard the explanation. She was from one of the “lower” castes, while those asking Singh to express their thanks were all Patels. The idea was not only to show special gratitude and respect to people who despite their poverty were contributing generously, but also to encourage greater intra caste collaboration on common needs of the village.

Along with the water reharvesting work the Jaldhara Trust also intends to take on reforestation work on a similar scale.

I asked Mathurbhai whether, with such a powerful support base, he is interested in entering electoral politics. His answer was categorical: “No. What can an MLA do? Very little! MLAs come to us begging for money. I have much greater capacity to do good work for society through our Saurashtra Jaldhara Trust. All this will be ruined if I join electoral politics. I will not demean myself by joining a political party merely to win this or that election.”

Towards Self Rule

It is now being widely acknowledged that our forests began disappearing and water sources polluted or destroyed as the management and control over these were forcibly snatched away from local communities by the rapacious colonial state. This process was not brought to a halt even after we declared Independence from British rule. However, as the ecological crisis becomes unmanageable, even government has had to acknowledge that at least in India, traditional systems of water harvesting organised by self governing communities worked far far better than any of the modern systems of water management and supply devised in the last century. This is being repeatedly demonstrated by numerous initiatives being



Urban women join the rural women in the campaign for water.

undertaken by village communities in different parts of the country to assert their rights to manage their natural resources. Their success proves that the vision, put forth by Mahatma Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*, of India being a society of autonomous village republics is not based on naive romanticism. It characterises the essential ingredients of our civilisation. Its revival will actually make modern democracy become more meaningful, deep-rooted and more functional in our country.

The increasing mistrust of the government and the growing desire of people to reclaim their lost powers is likely to strengthen real civil society institutions in our country.

Experience all over the country demonstrates that caste conflicts become more endemic in situations of

scarcity of natural resources and opportunities. However, non-partisan efforts for common good, when initiated by even a small group of people, spontaneously set into motion unifying processes which promote collaboration and cooperation between different groups. In addition, this sets off far-reaching social and economic changes. Mathurbhai’s work also shows how one can be well rooted in one’s caste and *biradari* and yet not be a casteist.

This report also illustrates that true democratic participation can arise when various groups and castes collaborate among themselves to work for common interests rather than have the government machinery constantly mediating between them. Over-much dependence on the state engages communities in perpetual competition for status and power. The current forms taken by electoral politics is also adding to social fragmentation and conflicts.

In forthcoming issues of MANUSHI we intend to publish other reports on such work in Rajasthan, Gujarat and elsewhere.

We invite our readers to send us reports of similar initiatives in different fields from their regions. □

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