

A watershed management project involving the community has had far-reaching impact on people's lives

Save water, save lives: Orissa sets an example

Sujata Dutta Sachdeva | TNN

One can easily miss the small cluster of mud houses in the midst of bright yellow sunflower fields. The dusty road that runs through lush green paddy fields winds its way up the hills. The air is thick with the scent of white *mahua* flowers being collected by villagers to sell in the market.

It's a beautiful drive down the dusty roads of Nuapada and Baragarh districts in western Orissa, but life's not as beautiful for the people. A drought-prone area, these are two of the poorest districts in the state. Nuapada, for example, has nearly 60% people living below poverty line. Most are tribals like Gonds, Bhunjias, Dals etc, who depend on agriculture for sustenance. Ironically, despite getting an average rainfall of 1,300 mm, the district is drought prone.

Baragarh, however, is more fertile as it's drained by several rivers. But agriculture is still backward and more than 70% of the farmers are small or marginal. Also, an inequitable social structure means most people don't have access to good land. They till the unirrigated slopes and have to depend on erratic rainfall for water.

Poor productivity means indebtedness — the informal interest rate for loans is as high as 10%.

Agents of change

Till recently, most families migrated to other areas to make a living. This went on till the villagers learnt how to conserve rainwater through watershed development.

Usually, the rainwater would drain off or simply dry up. Now, the community along with the Orissa government and NGOs has started watershed programmes to conserve water in wells, man-made ponds and bunds. The state government has set up a Watershed Development Mission — the first of its kind in India — to take up livelihood and community development programmes.

At the village level, watershed committees implement the programmes. The good thing is, women too have come to the forefront as agents of change. They have formed self-help groups (SHG) to supplement their income.

Malati Sabar's is one such family in Suklimundi village, Nuapada. They used to migrate to brick kilns in Andhra Pradesh every year. Now, Malati collects *mahua* flowers to supplement her income while her husband, a small farmer, grows an annual paddy crop on their two-acre plot. Malati has also become a member of an SHG that

retails kerosene. Recently, she took a loan from the SHG to buy a goat. "My life has changed ever since the watershed programme was introduced here," says Malati.

In western Orissa, the watershed programme is being jointly implemented by the government and Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK government under the Western Orissa Rural Livelihood Project (WORLP). "We are following a 'watershed plus' approach. The aim is to give people more livelihood options besides agriculture," says

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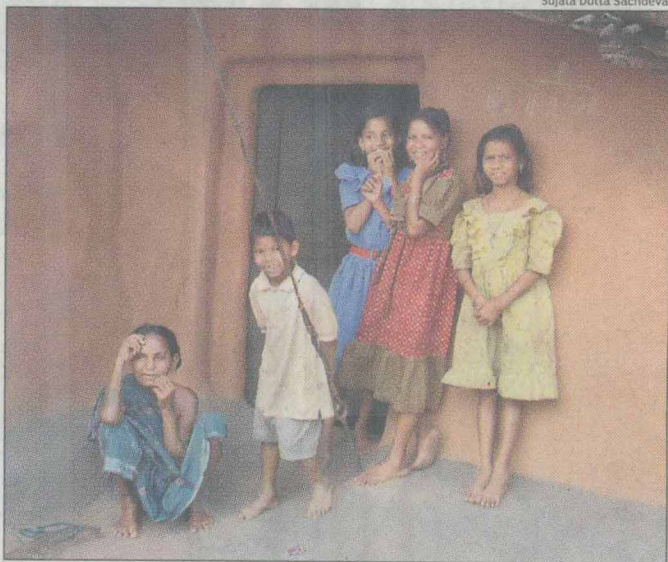
and the migrant was left with almost nothing. But now life's looking up. Tunu now grows paddy, onions, vegetables, sunflowers etc, on his two-acre patch. He has built a low-cost onion storage area and his *kaccha* house has been replaced by a *pucca* one. He has a motorbike and even a telephone.

Similarly, Jamuna Sabar, a widow from Malpada village, used to work as a coolie during the lean months while her son went to Surat as a labourer. Now, they have dug a pond that helps them grow paddy and vegetables. "We plan to diversify our crops and start pisciculture too," says Jamuna.

Common cause

Watershed development is not just about livelihood but also capacity building. Awareness levels among villagers have gone up and community mobilisation is more easy. Ambahal village in Baragarh is a

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Better future: Improved livelihood means that the children now go to school

Sarat Behra, project director, Watershed Commission, Nuapada. Villagers say they are earning more from the same field and it's regular income too. Moreover, they now have the option of both farm and non-farm activities in their villages. This has curtailed the seasonal distress migration.

Tunu Sabar of Larki village was one such migrant who would go to Andhra Pradesh during the lean season. "Hardly any work was available here. We couldn't irrigate our fields or grow crops. Most of us went to Hyderabad, Bhubaneswar, even Surat to work in brick kilns or as labourers," he says. Life at the brick kilns was tough. Each family got Rs 5,000 as advance from the *sardar* along with a weekly food allowance. In the end, the *sardar* took his cut

good example. Here, the watershed development community got together to shut the liquor shop so that the village could get aid from NGOs. "We realised we couldn't get money unless everyone got together. So we shut the liquor shop. Now we are working to spread education, build roads, control malaria etc," says Kamilini Patnaik, chairperson, watershed development committee. Moreover, the community makes sure the development work touches the poorest first and then trickles up. The central government is now planning to replicate this success story in other states as well.

Water, which used to divide a community into haves and have-nots, is now becoming a great social leveller.

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