

STUDY ON WOMEN'S RIGHT TO WATER

**Capturing the realities on the ground in
the three project districts of Jalaun,
Hamirpur and Lalitpur**



**Supported by the European Union
Reference: EuropeAid/130-166/L/ACT/TPS**

STUDY ON WOMEN'S RIGHT TO WATER

Capturing the realities on the ground in the three project
districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur



Supported by the European Union
Reference: EuropeAid/130-166/L/ACT/TPS

Produced by **Women's Feature Service**,
in partnership with **Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan**,
for the project Establishing Women's 'First' Right to Water Resources

C O N T E N T S

Introduction to the Study	07
Chapter 1:	
General situation in Bundelkhand	10
Chapter 2:	
Women and water: Scenario on the ground	18
Chapter 3:	
Caste hierarchies and access to water	29
Chapter 4:	
Tribal women and their access to water and livelihoods	36
Chapter 5:	
Impact of migration on women's lives.....	44
Chapter 6:	
Way Forward	52

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BDO	Block Development Officer
BPL	Below Poverty Line
DM	District Magistrate
SDM	Sub Divisional Magistrate
Dai	Midwife
Dalit	Scheduled Caste person
GOI	Government of India
HDR	Human Development Report
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment (Guarantee Act)
MMR	Maternal Mortality Ratio
MP	Madhya Pradesh
NFHS-3	National Family Health Survey -3
NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NRHM	National Rural Health Mission
OBCs	Other Backward Classes
PSSS	Parmath Samaj Sevi Sansthan
SHGs	Self-Help Groups
SC	Scheduled Castes
ST	Scheduled Tribes
UN	United Nations
UP	Uttar Pradesh
WFS	Women's Feature Service

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY ON WOMEN'S RIGHT TO WATER

Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan (PSSS), which has been working in the Bundelkhand region since the mid-nineties on issues of development, social progress and environmental regeneration, has always adopted a women-centric approach in all its interventions. In early 2011, Parmarth got an opportunity to take these efforts to the next level when it was granted assistance from the European Union to work for a project, entitled *Establishing Women's First Right To Water Resources* in the three locations of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur districts, all of which fall in the drought-affected region of Bundelkhand.

The overall objective of this project is to reduce the vulnerability of the local community by securing water management through women's participation. Among its specific objectives is to ensure drinking water security to villages, promote women's role in water-livelihood linkages through de-centralised and community water management initiatives, secure equity and justice for women through local institutions, build capacities in women, create awareness on the sustainable use of water for health, sanitation and agricultural purposes and engage and strengthen participation and decision-making processes in panchayati raj institutions by promoting women's leadership.

The Delhi-based Women's Feature Service (WFS), as a partner in this project, had the specific responsibility of reporting and bringing media focus to the actions on the ground. To this effect, we, the WFS team, undertook detailed tours and study of the project areas in 2011. We visited households in various villages and talked to local farmers, school children, women activists who had worked on water and sanitation issues, tribal elders and Dalit householders, as well as ordinary women upon

whose shoulders falls the heavy burden of ensuring water for their households in a region that has suffered long spells of drought. Summer was at its height during our first visit that took us to villages sapped of all life by empty wells and dry hand pumps. We saw the locked doors of homes that symbolised extensive out-migration, and spotted carcasses of dying or dead cattle in uncultivated fields. That initial trip was followed up by two more intensive visits as well. During the course of these three visits, realities were documented, data was collected, and focus group discussions were held with the communities affected by water scarcity.

In order to capture women's daily experiences of water collection in a systematic way, WFS devised a methodology for the conduct of these intensive discussions with women from specific backgrounds and living in specific situations. A questionnaire was used that sought to find out the water availability in that particular village throughout the year, the worst time for water availability, the coping strategies as well as general attitudes towards women in the village. Among the information sought from individual women was the socio-economic background of the respondent; the level of awareness, in terms of water resources and livelihoods; the time spent in collecting water; the tensions inherent in that responsibility and the general response of water officials and panchayati raj representatives to women's difficulties.

By systematically documenting what we saw and heard, interacting with officials and researching deeper in the main themes of the study, we could piece together the everyday realities of women, in terms of general lack of water and the tensions caused by the poor quality of water. We could also track the severely disempowering effects of caste on water access, as well as the biases that women from tribal communities routinely faced. While looking at the impact of migration on the women left behind to keep households going, we came across the case of a 13-year-old girl who functioned virtually as head-of-household. We have also been able to uncover to some extent the high costs women

pay while collecting water every day, in terms of their physical and psychological health. This is a serious concern indeed, given the abysmal and ubiquitous lack of healthcare in the three project districts.

On a more cheerful note, it must also be said that we came across innumerable women who, despite the difficulties of their existence, always managed a smile and a welcoming glass of precious water for us. Many of them displayed an inherent spirit of survival, and an ability to find solutions in the direst of situations. This saddened and heartened us. It was saddening because nobody should really have to struggle as these women do for a life-giving substance like water; heartening because clearly these women had the inherent ability to survive, even rise above their circumstances. Also notable were the many innovative approaches to bring about change adopted by Parmarth in the project districts that were having an impact on the ground and which, we hope, can be adapted and applied to other areas in the course of this project.

This past year of being associated with this project and writing for this study has proved an educative experience for us. We hope that our efforts would, in turn, prove educative to the reader. The *Establishing Women's First Right to Water Resources* project, we believe, is not just an extremely important one, given the existing socio-economic realities in Bundelkhand; it is probably the first one of its kind in this region and has the potential to emerge as a model that can be replicated in other parts of Uttar Pradesh and India.

We thank Parmarth, especially its secretary Sanjay Singh and its director Anil Singh, as well as the many members of its vibrant team, both at the head office at Orai and in the field, for expediting this effort. We also acknowledge the support of the larger WFS team in helping this team in various ways too innumerable to record.

— *WFS Team*

GENERAL SITUATION IN BUNDELKHAND

Uttar Pradesh (UP) constitutes the heart of India and is the country's largest state, with a population of nearly 200 million. According to the 10th state development plan, UP is projected to have a population of 306 million by 2050. It is also among the country's poorest states. According to government estimates, it has a per capita income of Rs 4,787, one of the lowest in India. In terms of social infrastructure, factoring in indicators like teacher-pupil ratio in primary schools, birth, death and infant mortality rates, literacy and electrification, UP figures at 14 among the 16 major states of India.

The drought-prone region of Bundelkhand comprises seven districts of UP and six districts of the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh (MP). The present project focuses on the three districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur, all of which fall in the Bundelkhand region of UP. Around a quarter of Bundelkhand's population belongs to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and 82 per cent of the total SC population lives in rural areas. These are regions that are generally feudal and marked by high levels of social and gender discrimination.

From the agricultural perspective, soil, water and weather are the most crucial determinants for sustaining lives on the ground. In this regard, Bundelkhand has had to deal with many challenges. Since 2003, it has been experiencing regular drought, which has severely hindered development and growth here and negatively impacted the village economy. The monsoon of 2011 was better, but it will take many years of normal rainfall to allow for recovery in the region.

The urban and rural regions of Bundelkhand often afford a study in contrasts. While some urban pockets are witnessing rapid road building activities, construction of commercial buildings and other infrastructural transformations, the rural hinterland, and especially villages that have a high SC population, are left to cope with millennia-old challenges. Among these, the lack of water availability is the most obvious.

While Bundelkhand itself is among the low density regions within UP, it is unlikely to be spared the burden of supporting growing numbers of people in terms of food and land

and livelihood opportunities. Land degradation in the state is high. It is estimated that of the 29.44 million hectares of agricultural land in UP, 13.58 million hectares suffer from various kinds of degradation. Land holdings are also small and, therefore, unproductive. According to agricultural census of 2005 estimates, 80 per cent of landholdings in UP are less than two hectares, and Bundelkhand is no exception.

According to the 2001 census, there are 32,43,042 workers in the Bundelkhand region out of which 68.58% are main workers (67% male and 33% female) and 31.42% are marginal workers (3% males and 67% females). Not surprisingly, women constitute the largest chunk of marginal workers. Cultivators and agriculture labour comprises 74.55% of the total workforce in the region. More than 80% of the farming community constitutes small and marginal farmers working on rain-fed land holdings and are, therefore, directly affected when the monsoon fails.

The increasing costs of agriculture inputs – caused, among other factors, by changes in agricultural practices and the adoption of crop varieties that require a lot of water – is another critical reason for the rising vulnerability of small and medium cultivators. Earlier, farmers used traditional seeds but now they are increasingly adopting hybrid seeds, which are generally more water intensive. Besides this, small and marginal farmers do not generally have adequate resources and are, there-

fore, highly dependent on external funding for inputs like fertilisers, seeds, pesticides, water, pumps, threshing machines, and so on. Consequently, there is always a dearth of money for investing in fertilisers, pesticides and other input, including timely information, required for modern agriculture, and because there is not sufficient investment in the land, productivity remains poor. By and large, farmers are dependent on a single crop and most of the cultivable area is utilised during the rabi season. Hardly 20% of the net sown area is cultivated during the kharif season. Although the livelihood of about 75% of

LIVESTOCK IS ONE OF THE INTEGRATED COMPONENTS OF THE INDIAN AGRARIAN ECONOMY AND BUNDELKHAND IS VERY RICH IN TERMS OF LIVESTOCK

the population is directly dependent on agriculture, 60% of the gross cropped area remains rain-fed because of the absence of proper irrigation facilities.

Livestock is one of the integrated components of the Indian agrarian economy

and Bundelkhand is rich in terms of livestock. However, common grazing lands are shrinking and this is causing a crisis in livestock management. According to one estimate, in the year 1977-78, permanent pasture land was 9,033 hectares (0.30% of the reporting area). This declined to 5,401 hectares (0.18%) in the year 1998-99. Besides this, water scarcity has affected the rearing of cattle directly since it undermines the availability of fodder, too. It is fodder unavailability that is causing many farmers in the region to abandon their cattle, which roam free and destroy standing crops, especially during the months following the monsoon period.

Unfortunately, the state government's efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of the crisis in these various sectors of the rural economy have not been particularly helpful. Rural communities are not getting wage employment, especially in terms of agricultural wage employment. Traditionally, agriculture related activities on farms like molasses production or rope-making have helped to supplement incomes. But today these sources of earning are no longer adequate. The government's rural jobs scheme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGN-REGA), also provides some wage employment but it is clearly not able to address the current crisis caused by low agricultural productivity, a deteriorating natural resource base and declining water resources. There is also the lack of access to credit on reasonable terms.

Productivity of land is directly linked to water, and water use management. Historically, Bundelkhand has been known for its lakes, ponds, tanks, *bavdis*, wells, etc. These water sources contributed to replenishing ground water reserves, which in turn recharged the water bodies in the region and preserved moisture in the soil. The construction of ponds in every village was a traditional practice and different ponds were created for different uses. For instance, ponds were made to collect rainwater, for irrigation, for providing drinking water to animals, and so on. However, over the last five decades, the local and state administration have paid little attention to the proper maintenance of

these traditional water sources and haphazard construction has choked the channels that have conventionally recharged local water bodies. Together with this, the authorities have adopted a policy of leasing of ponds to private parties, which has contributed to the decline of such common resources. In some areas, local landlords have occupied ponds and allotted them to powerful interests operating at the local level.

Deforestation, encroachment in catchment areas and the consequent soil erosion has meant that all the major reservoirs, lakes and remaining ponds have been very badly affected by silting. There are hardly any regular measures being adopted by state agencies to address this problem, and today silting has impacted more than three-quarters of

the existing water resources, affecting their capacities adversely.

Today, scarcity of drinking water is a problem common to most villages in the region. According to a Parmarth study of 131 villages, only 7% had drinking water availability throughout the year. More than 60% had drinking water for just a month, while 31% reported that they had drinking water for two months.

Households that are most marginalised when it comes to accessing water are invariably those belonging to the SC and ST communities. Inequality in access to water mirrors inequalities in landholdings. What makes a highly unequal distribution of

**HOUSEHOLDS THAT
ARE MOST MARGINAL-
IZED WHEN IT COMES
TO ACCESSING WATER
ARE INVARIABLY THOSE
BELONGING TO SC AND
ST COMMUNITIES**

land even more disparate is the fact that those who are more prosperous and have larger land holdings have the capability of digging deeper and deeper wells and tubewells, and installing diesel pumps. Consequently, the declining water tables impact those communities - largely lower castes - which either have small holdings, or no land at all.

Small holdings, difficult weather, the high costs of agricultural inputs and an unresponsive state machinery, including government departments and panchayati raj institutions, as well as banks, means that there is a high chance of farmers switching to alternative means of a livelihood, especially in times of extreme weather. In fact, all three project districts have recorded a decline in cultivation from 1991 to 2001, with Jalaun registering the highest decline.

The non-availability of wage work usually compels many to abandon their homes and migrate for employment. And, Bundelkhand, not surprisingly, has seen high levels of migration. A politician recently claimed that around 6,000 people leave Bundelkhand every day (D. Sanjay Pandey, National Convenor of Bundelkhand Akikrit Party). While this may be a casual observation, it underlines a local reality. According to Census records, there has been a rise in those seeking work other than farm-based employment between 1991 and 2001, with Jalaun, for instance, reporting a shift from 19.5% to 26.4% of people choosing to do “other work” within that decade. In 2008, when Bundelkhand went through a particularly bad patch of drought, an unusually high number of passengers were recorded leaving Jhansi railway station – which services this region in terms of rail connectivity to the rest of the country – during the months of May and June.

Reports of farmers’ suicides, too, are no longer rare in a region where agriculture and agro-related activities are the primary sources of the livelihood.

Since often it is the men who migrate, the women left behind are forced to look after land holdings, keep home fires burning, and care for young children and old parents in extremely difficult conditions.

BUNDELKHAND’S WATER CRISIS: A VIEW FROM THE GROUND

As part of the *Women’s First Right To Water Resources* project, we travelled fairly extensively within the three project districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur, visiting homes and interviewing women within households, to understand water collection problems a little more closely. We entered into conversations while interacting casually with local people, but we also held focus group discussions with village residents.

Jalaun

According to the Census figures of 2011, the district of Jalaun, which has an area of 4,54,434 hectares, has a total population of 1,670,718 of which 895,804 are male and 7,74,914 are female. Some 27 per cent of Jalaun’s population is SC, which includes Chamar, Kori and Dhobi communities. This district figures as one of the 250 most backward districts out of a list of 640 districts in the whole of India. It, therefore, receives support from the Backward Region Grant Fund Programme. In terms of general literacy, Jalaun’s male population does fairly well – with 84.89% being literate. The

women, however, lag considerably behind, with a literate population of 63.88%. Male-female disparities also show up in the sex ratio. Jalaun reports a sex ratio of 865 women to 1,000 men and a child sex ratio of 880 girls to 1,000 boys.

The district has a forest cover of about 5.4% and is almost encircled by rivers, with the Yamuna and its tributary the Betwa on one side and the river Pahuj to the west. Yet, Jalaun has been experiencing a serious shortage of rainfall. According to a 2008 report on Drought Mitigation Strategy for the Bundelkhand Region of UP and MP by an Inter-ministerial Central Team, against a normal average of 800-850 mm a year, rainfall for 2004-05 registered a deficit of -23% Deviation, while it was -24% Deviation in 2005-06 and -47% Deviation in 2006-07. The year 2007-08 was the worst with a deficit rainfall of -55% Deviation. Although in 2011, the district received copious rainfall, it will take several years for the cumulatively negative impacts of sustained drought to be reversed.

Hand pumps, in the case of Jalaun, as indeed everywhere else in this region, are the principle source of potable water for households. As per the Government of India's Accelerated Rural Drinking Water Supply Programme, one hand pump is to service 75 people. Considering this criterion – according to a former district collector – Jalaun has already reached the point of over-saturation.

But when we visited a predominantly SC village, Sopta, in Madhogarh block, we got a clearer insight into how the 'right' number of hand pumps in a particular area may not translate into the 'right' proportion of hand

pumps there. For instance, the women told us, that the hand pumps that exist don't work sometimes when the agricultural activities are underway and the borewell pumps are switched on. It is for this reason that they have been demanding a water pipeline to the area as well as a more even distribution of hand pumps to help ease their problems of collecting water three times a day. So far their demand has fallen on deaf ears.

Hand pumps are often arbitrarily installed without taking into consideration factors such as the incline of the land on which it is located. In Udotpura village of Rampura block, we found a hand pump perched on a dirt swamp where waste water collects. As a result, no one uses this hand pump, although it is badly needed in a village where 70 households have no regular water supply and where 20 households do not have any pipeline connection.

Regular maintenance of water infrastructure is completely lacking in the villages we visited. The Udotpura example serves well. The pipelines laid here had developed cracks, and along an entire stretch taps were stolen. The local community has alerted the concerned authorities on this but has been met with indifference. The water authorities, in turn, argue that the villagers don't bother about the infrastructure and it is unfair to blame them for stolen taps, which the community has to be responsible for. What is missing in this conversation is the lack of accountability, on the part of the authorities on the one hand, and the local community, on the other. This is where water committees of women at the village level, such as the ones that Parmarth is working to establish, could make a difference.

Hamirpur

According to the 2011 census figures, the district of Hamirpur, which is spread across 3,90,178 hectares, has a total population of 1,104,021 of which 593,576 are male and 510,445 are female. Hamirpur, UP's least populous district, figures as one of the 250 most backward districts out of a list of 640 districts in the whole of India and receives support from the Backward Region Grant Fund Programme. Literacy levels among males here stands at 70.16%, with women registering only 57.19%. The district's sex ratio stands at 860 women for every 1000 males and the child sex ratio is 885 girls for every 1000 boys. About 22.8% of Hamirpur's population constitutes SCs, including Chamar, Kori and Basor communities.

Like Jalaun, Hamirpur, too, has registered serious and cumulative rainfall deficits in recent years. This has meant that the water level in the Maudaha main canal that supports much of the district's irrigation requirements – wheat, arhar dal and chana (lentils) are cultivated here – as well as domestic consumption has come down drastically, especially affecting the tail-ender communities. We visited Bargawan village in Sarila block that was badly hit by this phenomenon.

The local canal, or *nehar*, as the local community refers to it, which has been a part of life for as long as people here remember, is now – as village elder Shree Krishna described it “a mere drain from which we get no water”. The water from the canal only comes up to Rath, and this means that Shree Krishna, an Ahirwar – a community categorised as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) – has to depend on the rains to irrigate his fields. If the rains fail, as indeed they have almost every year in the

recent past, he and others like him have no option but to migrate to earn a living. According to Shree Krishna, sometimes the whole family migrates, but this is very disruptive and children miss out on school. So in most cases only the men migrate – they leave right after Diwali (October-November), heading for the brick kilns of Etawah and Mainpuri, and come back in June to work in their fields. If there is no rain, these could be very difficult months, when even the hand pumps dry up.

Shree Krishna described the abysmal conditions under which brick kiln workers live and work, in areas where there is no habitation and with only wild animals for company. The earnings are not great, either. So this livelihood option wouldn't even be under consideration if the water in the canal had been flowing right down to these tail-ender communities. Heavy siltation and lack of maintenance of the canal has thus cast its shadow on the lives of many in Hamirpur. Migration is directly affected by the level of water in the canal. This in turn greatly impacts women's lives directly. If they go with their menfolk, they live and work in extremely harsh conditions and their children's education gets disrupted. If they remain behind, the responsibilities of their men fall on their shoulders amidst the stresses of their own lives.

According to a hydrogeology report of the Bundelkhand region, compiled by Government of India's Ministry of Water Resources, there is an urgent need to improve efficiency of existing systems. The estimation is that by lining canals, repairing cracks and so on, 30-40% of water can be saved. Currently, tenders have been sought for this job.

Not too far away from Bargawan is the village of Beelpur, also in Sarila block. Beelpur is one of

the few villages that have piped water. But for 300 families here, 40% of whom are SCs, this is just water on paper. On the face of it, Beelpur has pipelines, taps, hand pumps. But a closer look reveals the real story: Drinking water is supposed to come to Beelpur from Mankahri, which is about four kilometres away. As part of a government water supply scheme, a borewell had been dug there and a pipeline was laid to carry water from this borewell to the three villages of Maharajpur, Mamna and Beelpur. But on most days in a year, the water does not make an appearance. This is for two reasons: Firstly, if there's no electricity in Mankahri then Beelpur does not get water. Without electricity, the water pumps don't work – and sometimes there is no power for 15 days at a stretch. Secondly, because Beelpur is at the end of the supply chain, the water that does make its way through the pipe either does not reach or is a mere trickle, that the taps might as well not exist.

What makes the bad situation in Beelpur unbearable is the fact that the hand pumps here yield undrinkable, brackish water. This means that the women here have no option but to access water from a well that is about one-and-a-half kilometres away. This becomes a nightmarish experience when summer is at its height and the water levels in that solitary well plummet. Water then has to be scooped out, mug by mug. One woman revealed to us that at times the water quality is so bad that there could be worms in it. When that happens they try and clean it by straining it through a piece of cloth. Not surprisingly, many in Beelpur, especially the women and children, suffer from stomach and skin ailments because of the quality of water. The dismal situation adversely affects women who have to trudge a total of three kilometres back and forth from

the well, hauling 20-litres in two pitchers on the journey back. Water quality in the hand pumps here makes all the difference between a life of normalcy and one marked by high levels of drudgery.

Under the project, Parmarth is working on a plan to check the quality of the local water and also do a canal analysis, in consultation with the local community, but the challenges are enormous and are not likely to be addressed overnight.

Lalitpur

The district of Lalitpur is connected to UP by a narrow neck of land and is almost completely surrounded by the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh. Lining its southern boundary are the hills of the Vindhya ranges, while the river Betwa flows to its north and west.

According to the census figures of 2011, Lalitpur, which has an area of 5,07,500 hectares and is in many ways the poorest of the three districts that come under this project, has a total population of 1,218,002 of which 639,392 are male and 578,610 are female. Lalitpur, besides having a sizeable SC population of around 24%, is the only district of the three in the project area to have a tribal presence. The tribes found here are mostly Sahariyas, Kols and Tharus. Of the three districts, it also has the largest area under forests – estimations vary but at least 12% of its land is forested, a quarter of it by moderately dense forest.

Like the other two districts, Lalitpur also figures in the list of India's 250 most backward districts. In terms literacy, it fares badly with a general literacy level of 64.95% – men at a level of 76.41% literacy, with women registering only 52.26%. The sex ratio, however, is a

little better here than in the other two districts: The general sex ratio is 905 women to 1,000 men, with the child sex ratio at 914 girls to 1,000 boys.

Curiously, though Lalitpur is home to seven dams, yet people here don't have water, which is really quite a telling comment on the priorities of politicians and planners of UP. We came to know of several villages in Lalitpur's Talebhat block, which are suffering from acute water shortage. Take Sahipur village. The 53 families that live here are dependent on two hand pumps. While this may seem reasonable, it does not present the true picture. In reality, one of these hand pumps is located in a school that is accessible only during school hours. As for the other, every time it breaks down, it takes weeks to get it working once again. For the women of Sahipur, water collection is a never ending chore. If they have to source water from nearby wells, it become especially difficult during harvest time when farmers make boundaries around their fields to keep animals out, which means that the women have to go by circuitous routes to reach there.

A lot of the water infrastructure, like hand pumps and generators, is routinely spirited away, either because the authorities have been careless in choosing its location or the local community has not displayed a sufficient sense of ownership. For instance, in Budawani village, a tank was installed in the year 2000, but only in a few weeks the generator that pumped up the water to the tank was stolen. Since the village has a mixed population comprising Adivasis (STs), Banskars and Ahirwars (SCs) as well as Rajputs and Lodhs (OBCs), there is no unity

when it comes to addressing the issue for their collective benefit. Consequently, the generator has never been replaced and 38 ST families have no access to water, which, of course, means that women in these households have to go long distances for water.

Given the social tensions over water, Parmarth has tried to adopt broad-based strategies, like holding rallies, staging awareness camps and organising public hearings to address local water concerns. It has also tried to encourage women to add to the family's nutritional status by evolving models for small kitchen gardens based on the waste water from domestic use, like bath water, for instance.

REFERENCES

Arun Chaturvedi, N.G. Patil, S.N. Goswami, June 25, 2011; Reorienting Land Use Strategies for Socio-economic Development in Uttar Pradesh, EPW

Uttar Pradesh Human Development Report 2007

Hydrogeology of Bundelkhand Region, Central Ground Water Board, Third Minor Irrigation

Census, Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India

State of Forest Report 2005, Forest Survey of India

Inter-ministerial Central Team; Drought Mitigation Strategy for the Bundelkhand Region of UP and MP 2008

Mehta, Lyla, 2006; Water and Human Development: Capabilities, Entitlements and Power

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN AND WATER: SCENARIO ON THE GROUND

The Government of India, in its statistical review of the progress it has made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), claims that India has made significant movement towards coverage of households having access to improved water sources. It is generally optimistic that the country will have reached one target of MDG 7, which is halving by 2015 the number of households without access to safe drinking water sources from its 1990 level. It is less sanguine when it comes to achieving the target of halving by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to improved sanitation facilities and expects to reach a level of 46%, rather than the required 38%. Since rural India is badly serviced by sanitation infrastructure, most people living in the hinterlands defecate in the open. The government hopes, by 2015, to ensure that it reduces the rural proportion of the population with no sanitation to 64%, against a target of 47%. (Source: Census 2011)

Of course, broad national-level assessments often miss out on the local level situation. Despite the government's claim that it is making

progress on providing 'improved water sources' to all households, in a region like Bundelkhand the drinking water crisis continues to be so acute that in some villages extremely poor people have been left with no option but to source water from private water tanker companies, paying large sums that they can ill afford. According to data collected by Parmarth in its baseline survey, of the 2,177 households surveyed, an overwhelming 1,924 are dependent on hand pumps. Recent Census data bears this out: It notes that for 44% of people in rural India, the hand pump is the primary source of water.

Hand pumps, however, are often not a dependable source of water. In most of the villages we visited in the three project districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur, usually, less than a fourth of the total number of hand pumps existing were found to be functioning and providing potable water.

NEED TO RECOGNISE WOMEN'S RIGHT TO WATER

That a lack of clean water and toilets has a di-

rect impact on people's health, well-being and progress has become the common sense of the times. According to the Human Development Report 2006, which terms the crisis in water and sanitation as "one of the great human development challenges of the early 21st century", an estimated 1.1 billion people in the world today don't know what it is like to have clean water flowing through a tap in their homes, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation.

Individuals require approximately 20 litres of water a day to meet their basic needs, but 1.1 billion people globally only have access to five litres per day. Furthermore, this limited quantity of water is largely contaminated and contaminated water causes 1.8 million deaths per year. But despite the enormity of the numbers, the crisis has remained a silent one precisely because those who are most affected by it are also the least visible, articulate and influential.

Census 2011 data reveals that 20% of "Indian households" have to travel more than half-a-kilometre for drinking water, and this figure has actually grown in rural India over the last decade. Of course, the term "Indian households" should rightly be read as "Indian women", because it is they who literally shoulder the burden of collecting water within the household. And it is not just in terms of their time, women pay for the lack of water in terms of their money, safety and dignity. Being poor, powerless, voiceless and of the 'wrong' gender, they are inevitably met

with administrative inertia. The privileged can usually take water and sanitation for granted. But for women in under-served regions – and Bundelkhand is a good example of an under-served region – their primary concern is the endless struggle to access these services especially in what women report as the worst months of summer – normally from April to July.

Closer interactions with the women in the region, reveal tragic everyday realities: How

**CLOSER INTERACTION
WITH THE WOMEN,
REVEAL TRAGIC
EVERYDAY REALITIES:
SEVERAL HOURS IN
THEIR DAYS AND EVEN
NIGHTS ARE SPENT IN
COLLECTING WATER**

many hours in their days, and even nights are spent in collecting water; how children fall ill because of poor quality of water and the trauma and effort to take care of them; how they try and avoid relieving themselves, leaving themselves open to serious health conditions; how even

when they are heavily pregnant, or very ill, or very old, the unremitting chore of collecting water remains their lot. And how, during the rainy season, water-borne diseases proliferate because of overflowing gutters that easily spill into drinking water sources.

Procuring water from the local hand pump, stand pole or tanker is an extremely stressful activity – with fights breaking out between neighbours and tensions being created within households. It affects children's schooling – especially the schooling of the girl child – creates hostility and insecurity, and carries huge opportunity costs. One woman we spoke to actually measured the time lost in collecting water in terms of the number of baskets she

could otherwise have made. Another, a farm labourer, graphically described how, after working from eight in the morning to seven in the evening in the fields, digging or harvesting crops under the harsh sun, even though she is completely exhausted there's no escaping from collecting water and cooking food for the family. Women also talked about the serious challenge of ensuring hygiene during menstruation.

What makes getting access to water and sanitation even more of a problem is the prospect of the negative impacts of climate change, set to deepen in the near and long term future. Scientific evidence has clearly established that the climate everywhere is changing, and it is the poorer communities and, particularly, the women in these communities who are going to be disproportionately affected. In Bundelkhand, for instance, the monsoons have failed over five consecutive years. In such a situation, marginalised communities become more dependent on common resources like ponds and public wells. Women generally have more contingent and informal rights to such water usage and in most informal systems there is a low recognition of their specific water needs. So under conditions of scarcity or rationing, water use and rights are typically prioritised for higher value activities. In other words, as a valuable resource like water becomes scarcer, access to it will become increasingly restricted.

The delivery system, of course, remains impervious to all of these realities. For local administrators, planners and engineers, women – and their problems – hardly exist. No one in government departments is actually counting the costs of neglecting this issue, although the world over academics, researchers and water

activists are arguing that water and sanitation are among the most powerful preventive medicines available to governments to reduce infectious diseases.

There are four broad imperatives that need iteration at this stage. The first is to broaden the general understanding of the lived realities of those who live on the margins, particularly women. Second, we need to regard water and sanitation as a women's issue that has everything to do with individual security and personal dignity. In fact, the word 'dignity' has to be embedded in the context of women's rights. It has to be broadened to encompass the day-to-day lives of women.

Making communities – and the women in them – more articulate about their right to water and sanitation is the third big imperative. Poor people have been shortchanged precisely because policy makers and administrators think they can get away with it. This is where awareness-raising and leadership-building has yielded impressive results, with many women – once too inhibited to speak out in public – coming forward to confront the authorities.

Finally, it is about changing old, entrenched mindsets within governments and local bodies. Officials tend to perceive infrastructure as gender neutral. Pipes are pipes and taps are taps, for both men and women – that is the common sense. But this is really not the case. We know that even something like the design and location of a hand pump can have profound consequences for women.

So the question is: How deep do women's concerns permeate policy-making and its imple-

mentation? Ultimately, this issue is not just about poverty, but about the poverty of policy-making. It is not merely about taps and pipes, but about women's lives.

BUNDELKHAND'S WOMEN: EXPERIENCES FROM THE GROUND

The Indian Constitution, which came into force in 1950, expressly mandates the equality of men and women. Yet, even 60 years after a functioning democracy, gender and caste identity determine lives in very fundamental ways in a state like UP and a region like *Bundelkhand*, where the feudal patriarchal order continues to hold sway, both in the public and private realms. For women, gender inequality marks every phase of life. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-3 highlights an unnaturally high female death rate in the 0-4 age group, exceeding male death rates by 22% in the state, pointing to deeply entrenched biases against girls within the household. The state also reports a higher instance of early marriage, with at least 60% of rural women becoming brides by the age of 18.

In the project district of Lalitpur, 80% of girls are married before they reached 18. Socially and culturally, girls are perceived as '*paraya dhan*' – belonging not to their natal families but the families into which they marry. This ensures that there are many controls exercised on the free movement of girls within the household as they grow up. It also means the

ending of educational opportunities. This is reflected in the literacy levels. According to the Uttar Pradesh Human Development Report (UPHDR), female literacy in the three project districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur were only 49.21%, 40.14% and 32.97%, respectively.

Tragically, marriage is often no protection. Within her married home, a woman may be assaulted for bringing in "insufficient dowry", or face domestic violence of various kinds. The state accounted for 30% of all dowry

cases, going by official figures, in the year 2000. Extreme forms of assault in a bid to show a woman her place may be rare but do occur in regions like Bundelkhand, including '*naak katwana*', when a woman's nose is literally chopped off to humiliate her in

front of the family and society. Similarly, maternal mortality ratios in UP are eight times higher than in a state like Kerala. This is a pointer to women's poor nutritional status and, therefore, high anaemia levels, as well as early marriage.

Within the home in most households in the regions, daughters-in-law to this day appear head bowed and covered before their fathers-in-law, after draping the ends of their sari *pallu* (termed locally as *ghunghat*) in such a way as to cover their faces and upper torso. This is a practice that cuts across caste lines. We found women in *ghunghat* in both upper caste homes as well as those belonging to the SC communities.

WE FOUND WOMEN IN GHUNGHAT IN BOTH UPPER CASTE HOMES AS WELL AS IN THOSE BELONGING TO THE SCHEDULED CASTE COMMUNITIES

The *ghunghat*, we found, has a profoundly limiting effect on women’s ability to express themselves. In fact, the moment the men leave a room, we discovered how the manner of the women got transformed: The *ghunghats* came down and they immediately became more vocal. According to Parmarth representatives, the only way to reach out to women in the household and get them to talk freely is to ensure that there are no men in the group doing the talking and no men listening in either.

Male presence, at least in the formal sense, therefore, continues to be a severely inhibiting influence on female behaviour. Not surprising this, given that decision making within the home is still very patriarchal, with a woman needing permission from the senior men in her household, which could be her husband and his relatives like his brothers and his father, for even personal decisions like whether she can be allowed to visit her parental home. Interestingly, even when the men migrate out of the village for livelihood purposes, and women may have to take over additional responsibilities, the patriarchal structure appears to remain intact, with men immediately resuming their position of authority on return. Male control can also be reinforced by episodes of wife beating. The NFHS-3 has established that 44.3% of married women in rural India have experienced some form or other of spousal violence. In the Bundelkhand region, we learnt of a case that came to the notice of Parmarth, of a 25-year-old mother-of-three from Madhogarh block in Jalaun district, who was regularly attacked by her in-laws: They would lock her up, and “punish her” by depriving her of food.

However, women are vested with one major

responsibility, without which the home would not be able to run: that of collecting water. According to data collected by Parmarth for its baseline survey in the three project districts of Jalaun (Madhogarh/Rampura blocks), Hamirpur (Sarila block) and Lalitpur (Tabehat block), women here spend on an average half-an-hour to one-and-a-half hours everyday on collecting water for household use. What is particularly interesting to observe is that in those households that keep cattle, an equal if not longer time is spent in getting water for the animals. A woman told us that to maintain a buffalo she needs to ensure 40 litres daily for its consumption. Ensuring that the animals are watered is clearly the woman’s responsibility and it is extremely time-consuming since it means hauling 40 litres of water for every buffalo.

Who collects water for the household animals in the three districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur, Lalitpur?*			
	Women	Men	Both
Jalaun	383	25	330
Hamirpur	486	30	166
Lalitpur	444	49	130
* Parmarth's Baseline Survey for the European Union supported project, Establishing Women's First Right to Water Resources			

Although dairying figures in the state’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), women’s work to make this possible is not considered “economic activity” in official terms. According to the 2001 census, only 19% of rural women in UP were found to be “economically active”. Yet, as Suman Manju of the Indian Grasslands and Fodder Research Institute, Jhansi, argues, in her article, ‘Participation of rural women under household and farm activities’ (Indian Journal of Agricultural Research, Volume

42 2008) – cited in BundelkhandInfo.org – women in Bundelkhand worked for 8.75 hours a day, whereas their male counterparts put in an average of 4.72 hours.

The Parmarth baseline survey data also indicates that the responsibility of keeping the home clean, unsurprisingly, falls to the women’s lot, as also the disposal of waste, which, of course, doesn’t figure as an important activity.

These duties and responsibilities can be characterised as “drudge work” and do little for the status of the women within the household or in terms of their own self-image. In fact, this work is deemed to be without any economic worth. It is taken completely for granted, both by state and society. New brides, as soon as the wedding celebrations are over, pick up their pots and begin the daily grind of water collection, along with the usual responsibilities of keeping the house and its environs clean, and this carries on well into their old age.

Who keeps the home and environs clean in the three districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur, Lalitpur?*

	Women	Men	Both
Jalaun	661	12	58
Hamirpur	611	14	19
Lalitpur	571	26	93

* Parmarth’s Baseline Survey for the European Union supported project, Establishing Women’s First Right to Water Resources

What appears to remain a totally unexplored area of study is the price women pay for hauling heavy containers of water over long distances pay in terms of bodily well-being. One elderly male villager, during a focus group dis-

cussion we had with a group of men in Bargawan village of Sarila block in Hamirpur district, observed that many in the village complained of painful kidney stones, which is clearly linked to the quality of water they drink. He also observed that many women in villages in the region had in fact “uterus troubles”. He put it down to the “strain” of their daily lives. We had an occasion to test his observation during a visit to Bangra village in the same block in the district, when we noticed a heavily pregnant woman (she later told us that she was eight months pregnant with her third child), working the hand pump 50 times to fill up her 10-litre bucket of water that she later hauled to her home about 50 metres away.

Uterine prolapse and pelvic floor disorders are associated with strenuous activity of this kind during advance pregnancy. In fact, one middle-aged woman did tell us privately that her “birth sack” has slipped and is causing her a lot of problems. Another woman who was working as an Accredited Social Health Activist, or ASHA, in Talebehat block of Lalitpur, told us that she believes that collecting water with so much effort has a lasting impact on the health of pregnant women. “Their babies appear to descend in their abdomens, many have prolapse of the uterus after giving birth. There have also been cases of still births, resulting in the deaths of both the mother and child. If a woman is exhausted all day, doesn’t get any rest, how can she have healthy children? Most women don’t even get one hour of rest during the entire working day from early morning to late at night. Most babies here weigh less than two kilos at birth,” she said.

The ASHA also advises women to observe menstrual hygiene and use clean cotton cloth

and not synthetic fabric, otherwise their uterus could get infected. But, according to her, the big problem women here face is that they don't have toilets, and have to either go to the fields very early in the morning – 4 am or so – to relieve themselves, or then very late in the evening. The other concern she flagged is that pregnant women don't get to rest, even for a few minutes, throughout the day.

However, since access to government provided medical care is also in the deficit in these parts – and it is unaffordable if private health institutions have to be approached – such conditions remain largely undiagnosed and untreated.

The UP government does have a health scheme under which people below the poverty line (BPL) are given an insurance card. But the experience of accessing healthcare is still fraught with problems, going by local opinion. For instance, when people in Sarila block of Hamirpur approach the hospitals in their nearest town of Rath, they find that ultimately they are asked to pay for most things, with health personnel telling them “*bahar se khareed ke lao*” (buy medicines, etc from outside). As one old lady put it, “*Garib aadmi ka khoon chooste hain* (they suck the blood of the poor).”

According to the UPHDR, the fertility rate in rural UP stands at 4.13 children. But through the years of child bearing, women get very little attention. For instance, only 22.6% of the women in rural UP got maternity care as evidenced by three antenatal visits for the last birth, and only 6.7% women reported having iron and folic acid supplements. As for the delivery itself, according to the NFHS-3, only 23.8% rural women received assistance from

a trained health worker and only 9.9% received some sort of post natal care. These figures may have risen after the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) was rolled out under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), but even so healthcare for women and pregnant and lactating mothers remains indifferent and most deliveries still take place at home with the help of a *dai* (midwife). An elderly woman in a village in Sarila block, Hamirpur, told us that childbirth can set a family back by several thousand rupees. When women go into labour there, a *jonga* (a three-wheeler) or a tractor has to be hired. Fortunately, this particular village was fairly close to the town of Rath, which has a government hospital. But still it can cost anything from Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000 to take a pregnant woman to hospital and get her delivery done. So how is such financing managed? “We beg people to loan us money – we get some money from here, some money from there. But it all has to be paid back, of course, sometimes with high interest,” she revealed.

The physically disabled are not spared the ordeals of water collection. In Udotpura village of Madhogarh block, Jalaun, we met polio survivor Brij Kunwar, from a Dalit family, whose right leg is very badly twisted as a result of an attack of polio she had as a child. Her husband, a casual farm worker, leaves early in the morning for the fields and cannot help her with water collection. She explained that collecting water for her is a slow, painful process, and it takes her three times the energy and time that it takes other women to collect one pitcher of water.

There are also episodes of social tension that the women here experience because of the desperation to get water as quickly as possi-

ble. Fights break out all the time between women over water collection. A case was reported from the Rampura block of Jalaun where a woman objected to some other women taking a bath at the hand pump just outside her door. This resulted in her being physically attacked by the other women “to the extent that her hair had been pulled out”, she later reported. The case took such an ugly turn that the ‘pradhan’ of the local panchayat had to intervene to sort out the matter out.

Case Study: Santosh Rani’s Daily Chores

To get a more systematic idea of the experience of water collection, we spoke at some length to Santosh Rani of Bargawan village. Her family is one of 150 SC families out of the 300 families that reside in this village, and subsists on farming. When the crop fails – as is often the case because Bargawan falls in a severely drought-hit region – the men migrate to nearby towns in search of work.

As in all the villages in this region, it is the women of Bargawan who fetch water from ever diminishing reserves; ensure that the livestock have their share of water; and even look after their entire families when the men migrate. Typically, it is the able-bodied males who migrate, leaving behind the elderly and very young who need even more care. Life for those whose husbands have migrated is also complicated by the fact that they have very little disposable income to run the household.

We spoke to Santosh Rani in a dimly-lit brick room where many village women had gathered with children and grandchildren in tow to listen. It was hot inside but the small fan could not be used because there was no electricity in the village for the last five months.

Santosh Rani agreed to speak to us, if we could move to a corner of the room. She did not want her words to be heard by the others. She is 23, and once coaxed into conversation displayed an ability to speak on behalf of all the other women. She did not mince words while listing the water woes of her community or expressing what she felt about the discrimination that lower caste women like her are sub-

jected to. She was even keen to look for a way out of their collective misery but believed that “no one will ever let us women speak freely. It’s just not done here.”

Santosh’s life revolves around water. Her day

begins at 4 am and she can never wind up her chores before eight at night. All through the day she has a series of responsibilities to take care of but, as she puts it, “All I have on my mind is how to collect water.”

Like mothers everywhere, Santosh, too, begins by sending her children to school. After that, it is a rush for water. The nearest water source from Santosh’s home in the Dalit basti (the SC neighbourhood) is a hand pump.

Try as she may, Santosh said that she is unable to reach the hand pump before 8 am and by then there’s already a long queue that has

**BECAUSE OF THE
DESPERATION AMONG
THE WOMEN TO GET
WATER AS QUICKLY
AS POSSIBLE, FIGHTS
BREAK OUT ALL
THE TIME**

formed because “lack of water is the biggest problem of our village”. It’s a 30-minute walk and she carries three pots with her. But three pots do not suffice to look after the drinking requirements of her household. She makes at least five trips in the day. According to her calculations she spends a minimum of five hours collecting water. Does she find time to be with her three small sons, we ask. Santosh replies with a question: “I badly want to be with them, but where is the time?” The day is so hectic that sometimes she found that she did not get the time to even eat.

Bargawan has around 20 hand pumps but only five or six actually work. Its four wells have dried up and while the relatively better-off residents have dug tube-wells, the poor only have access to the lone government tubewell in the area.

Scarcity apart, the quality of water, too, is questionable. According to Santosh, she uses the hand pump knowing fully well that its water is not clean since water levels here have declined greatly because of the repeated failure of the rains in this area that falls in the rain shadow. The monsoons of 2011 have proved to be a little better, and Santosh hopes that ground water levels will rise and that she will be able to access better quality water in the future.

Given the general pressure to ensure enough water for the household, even elderly women in Bargawan have to do their bit. Phula Devi, a 58-year-old grandmother of four, said she has been making these trips to the hand pump ever since she entered this village as a young bride 44 years ago. Hers is a 15-minute walk to the hand pump. She can hold only two buckets now, because she is frail and does not always keep well, but makes eight trips in a

day. She confesses that although she gets really tired, there is no way out of this if her household has to run – her daughter-in-law, the only other woman in the home is caught up in caring for her very young children.

Bargawan’s water crisis has put its stamp on the lives of every woman living here, whether young or old. Although it is their hard labour that ensures water in every home, women themselves have little idea of the centrality of their role in ensuring the flow of normal life and well-being of family members. Local customs prevent them from expressing their angst or putting their suggestions before local authorities and the gram panchayat. According to Phula Devi, women in the village are not allowed to speak, although she feels that the younger ones should now assert themselves. She is wise enough to conclude that unless women make a noise – like men do when they want something – women’s water problems will not be solved. She says she has lived with water scarcity all her life but hopes that her grandchildren will be spared of it.

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN AND WATER

Nominally and through informal practices, women are granted the right to manage water resources for the household and the general assumption is that domestic water supply is the legitimate sphere of women. Two questions arise here: How seriously does the government and local administration expedite this process, especially in water insecure regions? How supportive are male relatives in assisting this process given extremely unequal relations within the family?

The answers to both these questions are more

or less similar. The issue is largely invisible. It does not figure either in the policy-making space or in intra-family conversation. This begs a third question: Will the presence of more women in decision-making bodies at the local level make a difference to how this concern is framed?

Before searching for a possible answer to this, let us look at the issue of women's agency, autonomy and empowerment in order to understand better what constitutes the ability of women to make the right choices for themselves and their families and ensure that their concerns make it into policy-making. In an article in the Economic and Political Weekly, entitled 'Conceptualising Women's Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment', Nipendra Kishore Mishra and Tu-

lika Tripathi try to unpack the three concepts of agency, autonomy and empowerment, which they see as related but substantially divergent from each other. Even as they cite scholarship to show that women's agency is an important constituent of both women's empowerment and autonomy, and vice versa, agency "can be said to be operative when it results in fundamental shifts of perceptions so that women are able to define self-interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able, but entitled, to make choices". Women's empowerment grows out of independent factors like education and access over resources, which in turn could be linked to caste, wealth, family status and the like. Autonomy, in contrast, is the ability to make de-

cisions, the freedom of movement, and so on. The point is that a woman may be empowered, but she may not have autonomy, or she may have a well developed sense of empowerment but have a low level of autonomy.

This is a useful framework with which to analyse how women in the three project areas of the Bundelkhand region fare. Clearly, they are deficit in the sense of agency, with little ability to define self-interest or be able to exert choice; they are certainly not empowered –

with no independent income, little disposable income and extremely small land holdings – according to the Parmarth baseline survey, the majority of the population here has less than 2.5 acres land – and, above all, they belong to castes that occupy the lowest tier in the social hierar-

chy. We also saw that they had no autonomy either in terms of freedom of movement or the ability to take decisions.

Despite our extensive interaction with women across the three project districts, we did not come across a single case where the woman blamed her husband for leaving the thankless task of water collection to her. In fact, quite to the contrary. In Sopta village of Madhogarh block, Jalaun district, young Pratiksha Devi was articulate about her sorry lot. She said, "Even when we are burning with fever, we have no escape but to collect water." But when we asked her why the men in the household couldn't do this job as well, especially when the women are ill, she replied, "If our

**WE DID NOT COME
ACROSS A SINGLE CASE
WHERE THE WOMAN
BLAMED HER HUSBAND
FOR LEAVING THE
THANKLESS TASK OF
WATER COLLECTION
TO HER**

men do the housework, how will they have the strength to work outside? How will they earn to feed the family?” In another village in Talebehat block of Lalitpur, one woman commented that if her husband helped her with water collection, he would become the butt of jokes in the village, “so naturally they wouldn’t want to help us and neither would we want them to help us,” she ended.

Ironically, even those women who occupy posts in local government, lack the ability to articulate issues in a women-centric way. According to the Parmarth staff, who has interacted with them, they have no idea of women’s rights, or the laws that exist for women’s equality. An example cited was of how a group of Parmarth representatives went in search of a village sarpanch (head), who was a woman. After some difficulty, when the woman was traced and was asked whether she was the sarpanch, she replied that the sarpanch – meaning her husband – was away in some meeting. Therefore, merely electing a woman sarpanch may not change much. What is required is a gram sabha that is more sensitive to women’s issues; but that will not happen automatically just because of a woman sarpanch.

Despite these challenges, we saw significant expressions of a desire for change, most specifically in conversations with Santosh

Rani and Phula Devi. Women are also getting more aware of the value of their time and the health consequences of their unremitting household work. Along with this is the enabling environment of women’s reservations – these have now been raised by the central government to 50% – at the level of local bodies. Theoretically, therefore, there is scope of the emergence of women in the public sphere within panchayat raj institutions, which in turn would help towards focusing on an issue that is as close to their everyday lives as water.

REFERENCES

Krishnaraj, Maitreyi, 2011; *Women and Water: Issues of Gender, Caste, Class and Institutions*, EPW

Manju, Suman, 2008; *Participation of rural women under household and farm activities*, *Indian Journal of Agricultural Research*

Millennium Development Goals India Country Report 2010

Human Development Report 2006

Participation of Rural Women under Household and Farm Activities, *Indian Journal of Agricultural Research*

Kishore, Nipendra and Tulika Tripathi, 2011; *Conceptualising Women’s Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment*, EPW

Agarwal, Bina, 2005; *Landmark Step In Gender Equality*, *The Hindu*

CHAPTER 3

CASTE HIERARCHIES AND ACCESS TO WATER

The region of Bundelkhand in UP has a notably high proportion of SC population. As per the 2001 Census report, there are 16.2% SCs in India.

Within UP, in the district of Jalaun there are 27% SCs, which include the Chamar, Kori and Dhobi communities, while in Hamirpur and Lalitpur the SC population is 22% and 24%, respectively, with a similar composition in terms of castes. But despite their large presence and despite having had a Chief Minister belonging to the SC Jatav community in power from 2007 to 2012, SCs in Bundelkhand, continue to face deep and systemic discrimination and are disempowered in terms of almost every parameter, from education to health and well-being. This is a consequence of highly unequal entitlements to economic and social rights over the millennia.

Bundelkhandi society has historically been deeply stratified and hierarchical in nature. The Brahmin continues to dominate the caste pyramid, given the traditional ritual status enjoyed by this community. The Rajputs and Kshatriyas, as second tier, have been the landowners in this region from time imme-

morial. The Jhansi district gazetteer noted in 1947 that they owned 36% of the land, indicating their economic and social clout. Castes that formed the third tier, like the Vaishyas – predominantly traders and money lenders – as well as Kayasths, which have traditionally performed clerical duties, may not have had land to start with but have acquired property over time given the high levels of rural distress in the region.

Between the higher castes and the SCs, is the category of Other Backward Classes, or OBCs, which also includes the Yadavs, traditionally cattle-breeders and milkmen, who through the Mandal mobilisation have come to wield a tremendous political presence.

The list of SC communities from the region is long and invariably reflects traditional occupations. It could range from the Kachis, or vegetable cultivator, to the Telis, or oil-pressers and Gadariyas or shepherds. The Chamars, Koris and the Dhobi that dominate Bundelkhand represent the traditional occupations of leather work, weaving and laundering, respectively. At the lowest level of this

edifice are categories like Doms, who have been treated over the centuries as less than human and falling in the category of “untouchables”. It is they who have traditionally worked as cremation ground attendants, clearing the carcasses of dead animals and the like. They have also worked as scavengers, removing the toilet waste from the homes of the upper castes.

India has officially outlawed the practice and the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993 prescribes exemplary punishment for anyone who makes another perform such demeaning work. Recently, the central government even informed the Supreme Court that appropriate steps will be taken to amend this Act to make it more comprehensive for the total emancipation of sanitary workers involved in all forms of manual scavenging, including sewerage cleaning and the cleaning of septic tanks. However, manual scavenging has continued to persist in some form or another to the present day, especially in a region like Bundelkhand where social change has been slow in coming. In fact, one of the social groups Parmarth works with is the swachkaar samudaya, or manual scavengers.

Caste has traditionally been an extremely potent mediating factor in the access to water. Over the years, the rigid separations that have marked social intercourse have been faithfully reflected in water access and, in fact, came to symbolise the inequality between the castes. When Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar launched a political agitation in December 1927 to fight caste oppression, he chose as his site of action the Chavadar tank at Mahad in Maharashtra, the water of which was earlier reserved for caste Hindus, for very good reason. As he put

it in his address on that occasion, “The reason for (caste Hindus) preventing the untouchables from drinking it (the water of the tank) is that they do not wish to acknowledge by such permission that castes declared inferior by sacred tradition are in fact their equals.”

In an article, entitled ‘Caste, Gender and Rhetoric of Reform in India’s Drinking Water Sector’, Deepa Joshi draws an interesting parallel between Dalits and women when it comes to using water as a medium of exclusion: “Women’s responsibility for carrying and using water exemplifies universal patriarchy, which results in certain structural and symbolic inequality between men and women. Dalits are debarred from using fresh water in nullas; menstruating women are also forbidden to fetch water from the village’s fresh water source as they are seen to “pollute” the source.”

As Shri Krishan, in a study, ‘Water Harvesting Traditions and the Social Milieu in India: A Second Look’, points out, over the years Indian villages are invariably stratified into different caste groups, with the dominant caste generally getting to regulate water management. According to him, the social mapping of Indian villages is generally such that the highest castes tend to reside at the centre, while others are arranged towards the periphery “in decreasing order of their position”. In other words, the lowest castes inhabited the periphery.

While the more overt and blatant forms of preventing the access of SC communities to water have ended in post-Independent India, what we found during our visits to the villages in the project area was that, whether by circumstance or design, SC communities were

the ones that were more likely to be affected by the asymmetric distribution of water, than any other.

Interactions with local media persons in Bundelkhand bear this out. The media persons pointed out that even government institutions, the Jal Nigams (water corporations), discriminated in subtle ways. For instance, when wells are constructed, those that service poor and marginalised communities are invariably more shallow and, consequently, the quality of water in them, poorer. In contrast, when such work is done for the privileged and knowledgeable, care is taken to bore deep enough to ensure potable water. Similarly, as we saw in Hamirpur district, when the water from Mankahri finally reaches the 150 SC fam-

ilies in the village of Beelpur, located at the tail-end of the pipeline, it is almost non-existent, at best only a trickle. This is not uncommon, according to the villagers we spoke to. In fact, they pointed out that the wells or taps meant for the SC areas are invariably poorer in quality.

What all this means, of course, is that the women of the SC communities are forced to spend more time in the collection of water, with all the closer and better water sources appropriated by the dominant castes for their exclusive use. This appropriation can take various forms. Local media persons interviewed reveal that they have come across instances where hand pumps have got “captured” by the influential persons in the

village who have had locks placed on them.

Shri Krishan also lists various “untouchability” practices that continue to be in place: 1) Scheduled Caste women are not be allowed to fetch water from public wells and taps but instead have to wait for the dominant castes to draw water first and then pour water into their pots. 2) They are made to stand in a separate queue with a different pulley to draw water from a well, and only after the dominant castes have taken their share will they be al-

lowed to draw water. 3) Bathing in village ponds is forbidden to women from the Scheduled Castes. 4) Even children are not spared the humiliation of segregated treatment. In any case, water availability is also related intimately to land ownership, es-

pecially during periods of scarcity. Those who are more prosperous and who own land are more likely to have some wells that haven’t dried up during the periods of drought, leaving those without land at their mercy.

Case Studies: Water Collection For Dalit Women

To get a better idea of caste stratification and its impact on the right of SC women to water, we visited the village of Udotpura, which falls in the Rampura block of Jalaun. Udotpura has a population of 1,365 and of the 262 households here, 70% have at least one family member who has migrated for a better livelihood. Deemed an Ambedkar village, half the families living here belong to the SC community.

**APPROPRIATION TAKES
VARIOUS FORMS.
LOCAL MEDIA PERSONS
REVEALED THEY HAVE
COME ACROSS CASES
WHERE HAND PUMPS
GOT ‘CAPTURED’**

On paper, Udotpura's water needs are addressed by an overhead tank and connecting pipes. But water does not come at regular times and is sometimes released arbitrarily, or at the behest of some influential villagers. Since many taps on the main pipeline are missing, a lot of water gets wasted when it is released. Some parts of the village are located at a steep gradient. This means that at least 15 families located in the higher areas don't get any water since there is not sufficient pressure. The villagers also complain that the overhead tank, which supplies water to them, is not cleaned and its water is not chlorinated.

There are various levels of water deprivation in Udotpura. For instance, nearly 20 households in a SC neighbourhood have no pipeline connection whatsoever. Besides piped water, Udotpura has 35 hand pumps, but almost half of them are either not working or are poorly located. One hand pump is near a cesspool and people fear that its water is contaminated.

Women in this village wake up at the crack of dawn and make their way to a common water point – which is either a well or a hand pump – to fill up their water containers for the day's requirements. Water, not only rules their day but their entire lives. Its availability, its access and quality determines whether their children can go to school on time every day, whether or not their families lead a relatively healthy, disease-free life, and whether or not they will be able to make much-needed contributions to the meagre family income by seeking wage work.

So essentially, Udotpura's women are constantly chasing water, and yet if they happen belong to the Scheduled Castes, this pursuit

only gets harder. The Article 15 of the Indian Constitution may clearly prohibit discrimination on the basis of caste in terms of use and enjoyment of wells, bathing tanks and other public water sources, but the reality that Bitoli Devi and her daughters-in-law Meenakshi, 21, and Kusuma, 20, relate only proves that for Dalit women access to water is a daily exercise of discrimination, humiliation and subjugation.

Says Meenakshi, a mother of two, "We are one of the 15 households that live on higher ground than the rest of the village, so even though we have a tap outside our house, we rarely are able to make use of it. Kusuma and I get up at 5.30 am and we hurry through our morning chores so that one of us can head out to collect water from a hand pump that is at least a 20-minute walk one way." But before that happens, the women go to some field for open defecation as there is no latrine at home. That, too, takes time – at least 45 minutes – as it is not easy going with small children. Meenakshi's elder daughter Kajal is three, while her son, Saba is one year old; Kusuma has two sons, Ankul and six month old Anmol, who she leaves behind with her mother-in-law.

Once back, bearing at least three vessels, it's Meenakshi who heads out for water. She doesn't relish the thought of going to the hand pump, especially in the mornings, because she is not allowed to take water easily. For her, this common water source is not so common. It is the dominant castes that monopolise the resource. "They make us wait, or we have to listen to harsh comments. We cannot do without water so we put up with all the humiliation quietly," says Meenakshi.

Due to the delays they face waiting for their turn, one trip lasts a minimum of two hours and they have to do this at least three to four times a day because they have a fairly large household. “Water is needed for all kinds of activities, be it washing clothes or utensils, or for bathing or drinking or cooking. There are four small children; one of them is my six-month-old son, so I need water constantly to wash his dirty clothes,” explains Kusuma.

The women eagerly wait for the days when the tap outside gets regular water supply. It’s been three years since the big tank for this whole area became operational but still the water authorities don’t have a set time: Once in 15 days, water comes once a day for two or three days at a stretch. All their mother-in-law, who is now feeling her age and doesn’t have the stamina to walk long distances, wishes for is to get water through the tap outside their home. And she has an additional reason for this wish. She says quietly, “I don’t like to step out of our community’s neighbourhood. Ours after all is a Dalit basti. We get treated very badly when we go into their areas.” The word ‘their’ in her narrative refers to the upper castes, of course.

Meenakshi, Kusuma and Batoli feel that all their time just goes waste in fetching water. The remainder of the day, all three are caught up in housework. The concept of free time is alien to them. In fact, being extremely poor and landless they would ideally like to find some way to help out the lone family member,

Meenakshi’s husband, on whose wages they all survive today. Says Batoli, “My elder son goes to Bhopal to do ‘*hamali ka kaam*’. For manual labour at construction sites or lifting heavy sacks of cement or foodgrain, he gets Rs 150 to Rs 200 a day but that too is not regular income. He spends two months in the city and then comes back home to hand over some money to us. We get our foodgrains on loan from some well-off farmer though we pay back with interest. For every quintal taken we have to give back the quintal and a quarter

more in grain. We can do that only when he gets his wages. Now, my younger son, Kusuma’s husband, has also gone in search of work for the first time. Survival is so difficult that even I would want to work in fields during harvest or when a tank is being dug nearby.

But neither do I get time from our daily water quest, nor does anyone here give work to Dalit women.”

There is a general reluctance on the part of the three women to talk about these issues, partly because of fear that such criticism will reach the dominant castes and there could be a backlash. We found the same reluctance in the village of Sopta, in Madhogarh block of Jalaun district. Water infrastructure for SC families here was markedly poorer than for families higher up the caste hierarchy and who wield greater economic and social clout. For instance, we found that in one neighbourhood of 35 families, there were just two hand pumps and located at both ends of the neighbourhood. When one of them breaks

THERE IS A RELUCTANCE TO TALK ABOUT CASTE DISCRIMINATION WITH REGARD TO WATER PARTLY BECAUSE OF THE FEAR OF A BACKLASH

down, there is great hardship, with the women having to walk at least two kilometres to collect water – a task made even more difficult because they have to take a circuitous route to avoid the fields of a local upper caste landlord, who does not allow them to cross. We found that the women were very hesitant to reveal this particular fact to us because they are apprehensive of a possible repercussion should the landlord get to know about their revelation.

RESPONDING TO UNTOUCHABILITY WITH TOILETS

Clearly, caste discrimination based on the concept of ‘untouchability’, or ‘chua choot’, as it is referred to in Hindi, is very much a part of the lives of women, and manifests itself quite directly when it comes to water collection. What is needed is better water and sanitation infrastructure - inherent in the promise of modernity – so that Bundelkhand’s people, regardless of their caste, can have an equal chance to live fulfilled lives, free of stress, disease and derelict living conditions. The only way to put an emphatic end to the nauseous work of scavenging is toilets that don’t need someone to clean it with a broom and basket.

It is in this context that we had a conversation with Mula Devi of Bhimnagar, who has been working on sanitation issues in the Madhogarh block of Jalaun district. For the inhabitants of Bhimnagar, water-borne diseases were a part of life, and many a child in many a household would succumb to diarrhoea or Japanese encephalitis with tragic regularity. But things started changing with the small, tin-doored toilet units that now mark their presence in this village, with most homes having installed one. “Once we realised how dangerous defecation

in the open was, how faecal matter could attach itself to our footwear and follow us from the fields into our houses, how it could pollute our water supplies, we decided to change things,” says 65-year-old Mula Devi, one of the prime movers behind the sanitation revolution that Bhimnagar is witnessing.

There is nothing particularly striking about this unassuming figure, clad in a yellow nylon sari, one end of which she uses to cover her face in the presence of any male. But when she speaks, her voice bears an enthusiasm that those even half her age would find difficult to muster. She is proud of the fact that she has been able to put sanitation on the local map. “People tease me and say that every toilet door should carry my photograph, but nothing would make me more proud,” she smiles.

Mula Devi’s tryst with social concerns began about a decade-and-a-half ago when Parmarth began its grassroots interventions in the region. Her exposure to new influences brought new ideas in its wake. She suddenly found herself looking at her surroundings, the pools of stagnant water, children defecating outside their homes, overflowing sewers. To get the message across, she personally went around talking to people about the dangers of open defecation and the benefits of building a toilet. “I always highlighted the fact that besides helping to maintain sanitary conditions in the village, toilets were crucial for the well-being of women, who otherwise had to wait until dark to relieve themselves in the open. Also someone had to clean the area, and those who did were treated as ‘untouchable,’” she elaborates. To expedite toilet construction, she made it a point to understand government schemes like the Sampoorana Swastha

Abhiyan under which toilet construction is subsidised. She learnt that a toilet with a soak pit could be constructed with government support for a modest cost of Rs 2,000.

Armed with this information, she began knocking at people's doors. "People used to regard toilets as a needless luxury. I had to convince them that it was an absolute necessity. 'Ghar ghar ja ke samjhaya. Mushkil se sudhaar aaya hai. (I went door-to-door. It was difficult to bring about a change)," says the elderly yet tireless woman, adding, "We tried to convince families that such a small investment is more than worth it, given the benefits to the household. We told them that instead of spending lakhs on weddings, it is better to spend Rs 2,000 on building a toilet because it would be a permanent asset for the women and girls of the family."

To ensure that the work on toilet construction did not slacken, Mula Devi would sometimes personally stand to get toilets completed. Today, more than half the homes in this village of approximately 200 dwellings wears the badge of honour of a toilet, and nothing gives her greater pleasure than to conduct a guided tour through the narrow lanes, pointing to the toilets that have now mushroomed everywhere.

But Mula Devi knows that this is a crusade without end, given the close link between sanitation and water. She is now turning her attention increasingly to the water facilities in Bhimnagar – like lining the foundations of hand pumps with concrete to ensure that

ground water does not get contaminated and developing roof water-harvesting models.

Here then is an illiterate woman, who has displayed the talents of an engineer, the commitment of a social activist and the qualities of a natural leader, who understands instinctively how crucial water is in women's lives.

To end centuries of such practices and inequalities requires concerted action on the ground, including affirmative policies supported by systemic changes in attitudes, water and sanitation infrastructure, proper resource allocation, as well as proper monitoring and justice delivery.

REFERENCES

Venkatesan, J, 2012: *Change in Scavenging Act Soon, Court Told, The Hindu*

Thorat, Sukhadeo, 2009; *Search for a Common Destiny, Sage Publications*

Krishan, Shri, June 25, 2011; *Water Harvesting Traditions and the Social Milieu in India: A Second Look, EPW*

Ambedkar, Babasaheb, 1993; *Writings and Speeches, Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra*

Joshi, Deepa, 2011; *Caste, Gender and Rhetoric of Reform in India's Drinking Water Sector, EPW*

Joshi, Deepa, 2002; *The Rhetoric and Reality of Gender Issues In the Domestic Water Sector, PhD thesis, University of Southampton*

Chaturvedi, Arun, N.G. Patil, S.N. Goswami, 2011; *Reorienting Land Use Strategies for Socio-economic Development in Uttar Pradesh, EPW*

CHAPTER 4

TRIBAL WOMEN AND THEIR ACCESS TO WATER AND LIVELIHOODS

Of the three project districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur, it is the last that has a tribal population. The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) (Uttar Pradesh) Order of 1967 lists UP's tribes as Buksa, Tharu, Bhotia, Kharwar, Baida, Raji, among others. Some of the communities, like Sahariyas, originally forest-dwelling hunters-gatherers, were often considered as Scheduled Castes, and had historically faced "untouchability" practices. The 1967 Order, however, bestows the 'tribal' category on Lalitpur's Sahariyas, but often because of overlapping identities of being regarded as both Dalit and tribal, women here experience untouchability issues.

In the run up to the 2012 UP Assembly elections, a demand was made for reviewing this list and adding more communities to it, but so far this has not been done. Today, many tribals are forced by poverty and illiteracy into working as bonded labour in farms and stone quarries of the district. Reports say that they are ruthlessly exploited in various ways, and given less than the minimum wage. They are also

encouraged to turn alcoholic by getting easy access to cheap liquor.

A measure of the vulnerability of this community is reflected in the fact that during the worst drought years from 2003 to 2009, reports of tribals in the state being forced to subsist on 'rotis' made of grass seeds, did make it into the mainstream national media. The common view among the non-tribal population about the tribals here is that they are not interested in working on their own fields and prefer to work on the fields of others because they resist a settled lifestyle. But this may also have something to do with the fact that tribal communities in Lalitpur have generally got a bad deal even in the government's resettlement interventions. The areas where they have been resettled have invariably been arid, rocky and lacking in water facilities. The fact that Lalitpur with seven dams and still experiences extreme water scarcity is also perhaps a reflection of the lack of provisioning that has been made for communities such as the Sahariyas.

While tribal communities have followed their own codes and practices, over the years, the customs of the majority population have increasingly come to influence their lifestyles. For instance, while earlier there was no practice of giving or receiving dowry in these communities, today – going by our conversations with women from these communities – that may no longer be the case and there are accounts of dowry exchanges taking place even within tribal communities.

At the same time, many households in tribal communities are headed by women given that the men migrate in search of work for several months in the year. Tribal women generally have little restriction on their mobility and, in fact, have greater freedom of movement, not being constrained by the rigid caste codes and norms that dictate the life of the non-tribal woman. However, tribal women are also more vulnerable to sexual and other oppression at the hands of local mafia and unscrupulous individuals. This situation is made worse by the fact that in terms of general social welfare tribal communities continue to be without an adequate safety net, despite their high levels of poverty and illiteracy and low levels of livelihood security.

Literacy levels in Lalitpur are the lowest among the three districts in the project area. Given the uncertainties of life and the high probability of a nomadic existence, many children in Lalitpur's tribal community discontinue their schooling prematurely. In

terms of healthcare, although Lalitpur is deemed a High Focus District of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), a report by a doctor for the NRHM pointed out that despite tribal health sub-centres having been conceived as an idea that needed implementation, Lalitpur does not have one as yet.

We interacted with Sahariya tribal women of Talebehat block in two phases. The first group we met was from a resettlement colony for Sahariya tribals on the outskirts of Talebehat town. The second group of women was from Budawani village of the Budawani Gram Panchayat. We also listened to some Sahariya women speaking of their problems in getting water during a public hearing organised by Parmarth in Talebehat in November 2011.

Sustainable sources of livelihood and regular access to water seem to be the two challenges facing Sahariya women. In many ways both sustainable livelihoods and water are intertwined. If there is no water, forests shrink and if forests shrink it affects both sources of livelihood and water. The forest was a source of income for generations of Sahariyas, who harvested medicinal and other valu-

**NOT ONLY ARE THE
FORESTS BEING EN-
CROACHED UPON BY
MAFIA ELEMENTS,
TRIBALS' ACCESS IS
BEING INCREASINGLY
CONTROLLED BY
FOREST OFFICIALS**

able forest produce to earn a living. Today, however, not only are the forests being encroached upon by mafia elements, the tribal community's access to them is increasingly being controlled by the forest department and other vested interests. This is compounded by the presence of many unscrupulous players and middle men now

entering the market in forest produce and medicinal plants in a big way.

When we visited a resettlement colony for Sahariya tribals in Talebehat, the first thing we noticed was that most of the inhabitants here were either elderly people or the very young. We were told that the able-bodied, both men and women, but mostly men, had left to do “*thekedari*” (contract labour), in the nearby towns of Jhansi and Bhopal. We also noticed signs of malnutrition and hunger. Some of the children there were eating green tree pods. When we asked one woman what the child was eating she said, matter-of-fact, “Oh, he is just filling his stomach, he must be hungry. Sometimes children don’t know what to eat and what not to eat, and fall very ill.”

We interviewed Sheelabai, who looked to be in her mid-seventies but could be much younger. When we inquired about her age, she replied, “How can I say how old I am. People say I am 70, but I still go to the jungle to gather forest produce.” We asked her what she gathered and she mentioned twigs, neem leaves (*Azadirachta indica*), palash flowers (*Butea frondosa*), mahua flowers (*Madhuca longifolia*), and khair (*Acacia chundra*). Women like Sheelabai also gather wild honey and edible gums from the forests. She revealed that earlier she would get much more but now the “jungle” has also “changed” and many medicinal plants she used to once obtain no longer grow now. She also pointed out that the forest people often stopped her. “We consider ourselves lucky if we get a handful of *bathua* (*Chenopodium album*) or a *pav* (250 grams measure) of chironji seeds (*Buchanania lanzan*),” said Sheelabai. Some of this produce needs some further processing. For instance, the seeds of *khair* have to be removed from its

pods and then Sheelabai can expect to get Rs 30 a pav for it. Incidentally, such produce has its distinct seasons. For instance, the mahua flower, which is used to brew alcohol for both domestic and commercial consumption, is available in the months of March and April, while the mahua fruit, which is valuable for its medicinal properties as well as its oil, is collected in June-July.

But in selling her produce, Sheelabai hits another hurdle. She takes her stuff to the mandi (market) at Talebehat. She explained how the transaction worked: “When we take the produce we have harvested to the trader, he first curses us for expecting money for such rubbish. Then he gives us some small amount and tries to shoo us away. We know what we bring is sometimes very valuable. We try to argue with him but we finally have to settle for whatever he gives us. He just tells us if we demand more that we can take our goods back for all he cares. In fact, he often say, ‘Take it back, I don’t want it.’ But we can’t take it back, of course, what will we do with it? Besides we are always short on cash and need every paisa we get.”

This narrative brings out the sad lack of options for women like Sheelabai because of their illiteracy and ignorance. Exploitation is inherent in every one of these transactions.

Sahariya women are also regarded by the local community as thieves and vagrants and are at the receiving end of a lot of abuse. One woman talked about how once when she took a few leaves from a farm in which onions were growing, the farmer chased her with his lathi (stick). He would have thrashed her if she hadn’t run away. Emaciated, with bearing signs of goitre and rheumatism, the women of this

settlement were clearly living on the very margins of existence.

In the village of Budawani of Budawani Gram Panchayat, Lalitpur district, we got to learn about the specific problems of water shortage that women from the Sahariya community face. Budawani has 267 families. Among the various caste groups living here are Banskars and Ahirwars, both deemed as SCs (although Ahirwars are sometimes classified as Other Backward Classes in other areas), Lodhas (OBC), Rajputs a couple of Brahmin families, apart from Sahariyas.

In the year 2000 an overhead tank was constructed in Budawani. Water pipes to each home were laid and taps were fitted. Yet, today, none of the families get piped water supply because within one-and-a-half months of the water system coming into operation, the generator and motor used to pump the water up to the tank were stolen. Over 10 years have passed but the service has not been restored. This means the residents of this village are crucially dependent on hand pumps and the few wells that still have water in them.

What was obvious about such a situation was that it was the Sahariya women who emerged the worst off. Take the case of Sunita and Dhiru. They are both in their early 30s, both homemakers and mothers. Whenever they get a chance – that is, whenever they get some time free from the chores of looking after the family, collect-

ing water, cooking, cleaning and the like – they also step out to work as farm labour to supplement their meagre household income.

As Sahariya women they have grown up in poverty and face discrimination at every turn. This has become so much an intrinsic part of their lives today that it doesn't seem out of the ordinary that their basic human right to water is also often denied to them just because they belong to an extremely disadvantaged tribal

community. Across the district of Lalitpur, in fact, the status of tribal communities is not much different.

Budawani has 38 Sahariya households and they all live together at one end of the village, conforming to the characteristic separa-

tions between castes and communities within the universe of the Indian village.

The Sahariyas, according to local women Sunita and Dhiru, generally prefer to keep to themselves as they fear being ostracised by those living out of its neighbourhood. Dhiru put it this way: "*Hamara gaon main kisi aur se koi lena dena nahi hai* (we have nothing to do with others in the village)." There is good reason why she says this: Caste and untouchability issues put their imprint on water access.

This sometimes leads to extremely piquant situations. Take the experience of Thana village. Fairly close to Budawani, it also falls in Talbehat block, and is situated on the banks of river Belva, right under the Mata Tila dam. There are 100 families in that village of which

**FOR SAHARIYA WOMEN,
DISCRIMINATION HAS
BECOME SO INTRINSIC
TO THEIR LIVES THAT
THE DENIAL OF WATER
ACCESS DOESN'T SEEM
OUT OF THE ORDINARY**

50 households are of Sahariyas and an equal number belong to Ahirwar caste, which is regarded in some regions as a SC community and in other regions as OBCs. The houses line either side of the road that runs through Thana for a length of about one kilometre. For drinking water, there is a hand pump on one end of the basti of the Sahariyas and one hand pump installed at the other end for the Ahirwars. However, the water of the hand pump in the Ahirwar basti is brackish, so the hand pump in the Sahariya basti caters to the drinking water needs of even the Ahirwar community. Each community labels the other as “untouchables”. This means that the informal basis on which water access is based is that of first come, first served. This leads to a competitive situation developing with both communities competing with each other to queue up at the lone hand pump to get their share of the water. According to Vimla, a member of the Pani Panchayat Samiti of Thana, “If members of one community are at the hand pump, the other community members wait for their turn at a distance. Because of this, during the summers when water availability is a problem, people start queuing up at the hand pump from 3 am. Thankfully, the drain near the village has water round the year, which takes care of drinking water needs of the cattle and water for washing clothes, otherwise the competitive bid to get first access to water could have led to a riot like situation.”

Getting back to Sunita of Budawani village, here's how a typical day for this hardworking young woman begins: She wakes up by 5 am, washes her face with the little store of water collected the day before, and a few minutes later is on her way to a well located two kilometres away. It takes her nearly 25 minutes to cover that distance.

For having the ‘privilege’ of taking three buckets of water from this well, Sunita and her friends face daily humiliation at the hands of the other communities in the village dependent on that well, especially the powerful Lodhas in her village.

The big problem is that the well is located on the land of a privately owned farm. So when someone like Sunita comes to draw water she has to have the tacit permission of those who own the land. Generally they are allowed use of this water, but when water resources decline in the height of summer, the tension over water rises with the temperature. “There have been many times when we have been denied water from this well, especially in summer,” said Sunita.

When water to this particular well is denied to her, she and others from her community go to a nearby hand pump. The problem here is that the water quality of this hand pump is brackish, which is alright for washing dishes, and even bathing – although the soap does not lather, Sunita complained. It is clearly not of drinkable quality but, as Sunita explained if there is no other option then this water just has to serve for drinking purposes as well. The health impact of drinking unpotable water has not been studied, but it is well established that water minerals such as calcium and magnesium are factors in the formation of kidney stones.

To access the water of the hand pump, Sunita has to wait for quite a while, and has to make at least three trips a day to meet the requirements of the household. In other words, water collection can take up to six hours; and even after all that effort there is no guarantee about its quality.

We asked Sunita when she found the time to relieve herself since she does not have a toilet in her home. She said that the field she uses, which is also used by other Sahariya women, is about a walk of at least 20 minutes. While open defecation is a common enough phenomenon in Budawani – none of the houses in the village, according to Sunita, has a toilet – she is careful not to be caught by any farmer while doing her ablutions. Sahariya women are often targeted and she does feel scared. There is the fear of being beaten and even sexually assaulted. Sunita has, in fact, witnessed one incident of some Sahariya women being hit with sticks by the local farmers when they were in the fields defecating. “No one likes to go out into the open but then what other choice do we have? It’s really a degrading experience to be caught and punished for this,” she said. Her words are a comment enough on how her human right to life, health and dignity are under assault every day.

The irony, of course, is that going by existing infrastructure, water supply should actually have been the least of Budawani’s problems as this village has had an overhead tank, pipelines and taps since 2000. Even electricity supply, normally missing in most villages in Bundelkhand, is fairly regular here. But because someone stole the generator and the motor needed to pump up the water, within one-and-a-half months of the commencement of regular water supply, women like Sunita and Dhiru find themselves in dire straits. What is striking about this situation is

that in the last decade and more the village has not displayed the social cohesion and unity of purpose required to pressurise the local Jal Nigam to get their water supply restored. As for those in charge of water supply here, they obviously do not consider the everyday traumas of Budawan’s residents important enough for their attention.

In such a situation it the poorest and most marginalised who are the worst affected. The more prosperous can make alternative arrangements like getting a borewell dug or arranging for a tanker of water. The summer months are particularly harrowing for

Budawani’s Sahariya community, with the women as always bearing the biggest burden. This stretch in the Bundelkhand region has seen drought almost continuously since 2003. As the harsh suns beats down for at least four months – starting April – the wells become nearly dry and

water levels in the hand pumps plummet. And even this gets extracted and directed to fields by local farmers who can afford diesel pumps.

Dhiru recalled standing at the well from three in the morning during one such spell. “The water level was rock bottom and there were so many people wanting the little bit of water that was there for their drinking requirement.” The women then patiently filled their smaller steel vessels with this muddy water and poured it into their larger water container by passing it through a fine cloth. The method

**THE WOMEN THEN
FILLED THEIR SMALLER
VESSELS WITH THIS
MUDDY WATER AND
POURED IT INTO
LARGER CONTAINERS
BY PASSING IT
THROUGH A FINE CLOTH**

does not really clean the water, admitted Dhiru, but at least it removed the heavier particles and dirt. She had begun at 3 am, and it was 10 am by the time she could make it back home for her other chores.

Chasing water is then the central activity of Sunita's and Dhiru's daily life. It leaves them very little time to seek wage work as farm labour. The fatigue and health problems like nagging backaches and the like, has to be borne without complaint because there is nothing that can be done about it. But what can be more stressful are the occasions when they are actually stopped from getting even a small pitcher of drinking water.

Although both women are clear that they want their children, including their daughters, to study, they are unable to always ensure that this happens. Sometimes getting their children ready for school gets delayed because of the time spent at the well or hand pump, so that by the time the young ones can reach the school gates they find themselves shut out, leaving them with no option but to trudge back home without attending class. But there's another factor at play here that can come in the way of children of Sahariya families attending school. On the days their mothers manage to get work and cannot spend time waiting to collect water for the household it is the girls who are sent to discharge this chore. This is especially the case during the sowing or harvesting seasons, when there is work available in plenty, but which also

means that they have to go off to the fields by 8 am and are back only by 7 pm. In times like these, the education of the children – especially daughters – gets very badly disrupted.

The local school in Budawani has classes up to Class Five after which the children have to travel 10 kilometres to Chandrapur where they can study till Class Eight. Those who manage to get past that milestone then have to travel all the way to Talebehat, about 25 kilometres away, to continue their education in a high school. Many of the Sahariya children drop out before they reach high school for many reasons, but in that list would surely figure water availability.

While the denial of access to water continues to affect their entire existence, are the women doing anything to set

right this injustice they face day-in and day-out? Last year, Sunita, Dhiru and several other Sahariya women were alerted by the awareness raising activities of Parmarth, as part of a European Union project on Establishing Women's First Right to Water Resources. They now know that it is important to talk about their water problems publicly, something they had never done so far. Dhiru put it this way, "It's evident that only when the authorities know we do not have water can they take action. And it is us women who will have to step forward. After all, the water crisis affects us poor women first, and the most."

With some help from Parmarth representatives, the Sahariya women had drafted a peti-

**ALTHOUGH BOTH
WOMEN SAID THEY
WANTED THEIR
CHILDREN, INCLUDING
DAUGHTERS, TO STUDY,
THEY ARE UNABLE TO
ALWAYS ENSURE THAT
THIS HAPPENS**

tion for the authorities that clearly enumerated the existing water sources in their village, their problems in accessing water and even suggestions on how the situation can be improved. At a public hearing in Talebehat in November 2011, in front of a room full of district-level officials, Sunita spoke out confidently on behalf of everyone when she said, “*Chup rehene se na hi hamein kabhi paani milega aur na hum par shoshan kam hoga. Aaj aawaz uthai hai, kal zaroor koi thos samadhan bhi niklega* (If we remain silent neither will we get water, nor will the discrimination we face be lessened. Today we have spoken out; tomorrow we will definitely have solutions, too.)”

One of the observations that emerged during this hearing was the need for the entire community within a village to take ownership of their existing water resources and infrastructure and work towards improving them. Rajiv Lochan Pandey, Project Director, District Rural Development Agency, who had participated in the public hearing at Talebehat, argued that leaving the whole issue of water supply on the government without community participation is unwise and everybody should have a stake in it. It is important, he observed, for the local community to understand water realities for themselves, the general scarcity of water in a region like Lalitpur

with its rocky terrain, the importance of learning how to conserve and preserve every drop, and understand the importance of recharging water sources.

The Sahariya women of Budawani appear willing to learn and use their new knowledge to protect their right to water. But the more vexed problem are the social faultlines in a village like Budawani, and the age-old biases, prejudices and discriminations that mark social attitudes to a marginalised group like the Sahariya tribals.

REFERENCES

The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) (Uttar Pradesh) Order, 1967

NHRM, Report of Jayant Pratap Singh (Dr), 2010

Making Water Everybody's Business, 2001, Centre for Science and Environment

BundelkhandInfo.com

IANs, 2012; 'Fresh Scheduled Tribes' quota in UP House suggested'

Chaturvedi, Atul, N.G. Patil, S.N. Goswami, 2011; Reorienting Land Use Strategies for Socio-economic Development in Uttar Pradesh

CHAPTER 5

IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON WOMEN'S LIVES

Migration within a country could in many ways reflect deep inequalities between high- and low-income regions within the borders of that country. It is the relentless search for livelihoods that powers a good proportion of such movement of people in India. More often than not, migrants of this kind belong to the most economically disempowered groups and, not surprisingly, include in their ranks a high proportion of people from the SC and ST communities.

While migration can also be viewed positively, as a strategy to ensure better economic prospects for households, in India it is usually a consequence of a large number of disempowering realities, ranging from practices of discrimination that have been the norm from time immemorial to small and fragmented land holdings, adverse weather conditions and the unavailability of alternative, non-farm economic opportunities, locally. These are the cardinal push factors for migration – termed as “palaayan” in Hindi – out of rural India.

While migration ostensibly holds out the promise of a better life, it comes with many hidden costs, in terms of insecurity, vulnerability, instability, and the disruption of domestic life. It also has several, largely under-documented, psychological costs. It requires major re-adjustment and “re-negotiation” within households in terms of responsibilities and could even mean that women have to bear the double burden of managing homesteads and farmsteads as well.

The states of UP and Bihar account for the highest net out-migration of people within India, with 2.6 million having migrated out of UP over the previous decade. Bundelkhand is one of the areas of high out-migration, and reports more than double the national average.

Within the category of migrants, marginalised communities like SCs, STs and OBCs constitute the majority. According to the 2002 BPL Survey data, Scheduled Tribes, followed by Scheduled Castes, are more likely to migrate than people from any other group. When

members of the landed elite move, they do so for better prospects, but for the SC and ST communities migration is usually an unavoidable 'coping strategy', driven simply by the need to survive.

There is also the phenomenon of “circular migration”, as some scholars have highlighted, with people leaving for stretches of a few months every year and coming back home – a pattern that often follows the agricultural seasons. That is, the movement out could begin after the sowing period for the Rabi crop (post-Diwali) and the return would be timed before the next spell of cultivation during the rains (around June-July). Most migrants head for sub-sectors of the economy like stone quarries, mines, construction sites, brick kilns and small industrial units where the prospect of attractive wages is extremely low.

This may lead to situations of almost bonded labour-type conditions. Usually, the contractor, or the *'thekedar'*, advances a sum of Rs 12,000 or 15,000, which, of course, comes in handy to address the immediate crisis. However, in the long run, this sum has to be paid back many times over through hard work. Sometimes whole families migrate for work on sites like brick kilns, mines or quarries, for two or three seasons at a stretch, without getting a proper minimum wage. As Shree

Krishna of Bargawan village in Hamirpur revealed to us, migration disrupts the pattern of life in the family and the conditions in the brick kilns, where people in his area of Bundelkhand head for work, is abysmal and it would not be a choice that he would willingly have made. He said, “They just throw us into a patch of jungle. It takes two people five hours to make a 1000 bricks that would earn us Rs 300. Tell me, if we had water in our fields and could cultivate the land, who would go and live and work in such conditions?”

LAND AND MIGRATORY MOVEMENT

It has been found that most of those who migrate are small and marginal farmers, whose plots of land turn unproductive because of the failure of the rains or because they can no longer support a growing family. According to the Parmarth baseline survey data, of the 2177 households surveyed in Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur, chosen to reflect the general socio-economic profile of the districts, the great majority of respondents reported holdings measuring just 0.02 acres to 2.5 acres. The first important 'determinant' of migration then is the size of land owned.

The more the land a household owns, the less is the likelihood of any member in it migrat-

Average size of land holdings in Jalaun, Hamirpur, Lalitpur*					
	0.02 acre	0.2-1 acre	1-2.5 acres	2.5–5 acres	Above 5 acres
Jalaun	232	189	224	52	29
Hamirpur	79	37	251	136	62
Lalitpur	160	39	226	148	79
*Parmarth's Baseline Survey for the European Union supported project, Establishing Women's First Right to Water Resources					

ing. However, small and marginal farmers have a slightly higher chance of migrating compared to households with practically no land. This is perhaps because the first category of families has the resources to hire labour and thus release family labour for more lucrative work outside their village. In other words, in normal conditions, the poorest of the poor are unlikely to migrate and families with extra hands – which more often than not are women – are more likely to migrate. Mechanisation of farming operations, which, in turn, displaces manual labour, could be a factor only in a few cases of migration for the moment, although as a trend it could rise. As farm activities get more mechanised, it could emerge as an important factor for displacement in the future.

Figures in a 2002 BPL Survey indicated that 50% to 70% of rural households across Bundelkhand have at least one member who migrates annually or has migrated permanently. The data also indicates that apart from permanent or semi-permanent migrants, working adults of 30% to 50% of the region's rural households migrate every year, seeking casual or seasonal employment.

With rising distress conditions, levels of migration also rise. For instance, given the almost continuous failure of the rains in the Bundelkhand region from 2003 to 2010, many villages here were emptied out of able-bodied adults. In their desperation to find some job – any job – migrants often fell prey to hucksters and exploiters, right from the point they reach

the local bus stop to their ultimate place of destination. Sometimes, the numbers of those who migrate out of a particular village are so high that a once vibrant village is rendered a mere shell of its former self.

In the *Hindustan Times* of November 1, 2006, Pankaj Jaiswal provided a graphic account of a deserted village in Jalaun district:

“Just as you enter Unchaa, resembling the ruins of a died-out civilisation excavated

from the womb of mother earth, a swirl of dust carried by an ominous gust of dry wind welcomes you.

Inhabited till February 2006, this 150-year-old village, just a kilometre from the Pahuj river and 10 km from Jalaun's Madhogarh,

now exists only in government records. In reality Unchaa is 'no more'.

Once the most prosperous village of the district, Unchaa simply could not withstand the successive onslaughts unleashed on it - dacoits, floods and four years of crop failure in a row – and gave in, triggering what is being termed as the worst case of exodus (100 per cent) in the Bundelkhand region.

Today it presents a perfect case for study. Right at the entry point of the village stands a school building. Hindi alphabets written on the blackboard have not yet faded. Signs of how recent everything must have been.

The roads to the village are full of wild shrubs

**IN THEIR DESPERATION
TO FIND SOME JOB,
MIGRANTS OFTEN FALL
PREY TO HUCKSTERS
AND EXPLOITERS,
RIGHT FROM THE
POINT OF DEPARTURE
ONWARDS**

and hedges. Most of the electricity poles have collapsed. Wires stand pilfered.

Some houses still have doors which seem to have been locked forever. Signs of how unbearable it must have been.

Also there is an MMR telephone tower in the middle of the village. It was a kind of wireless telephone used much before the advent of mobile telephony. Tell-tale signs of the village's prosperity. It was a pretty well off village, says Bhoopat, former gram pradhan of Bhimnagar, situated next to Unchaa.

'The exodus from Unchaa began with the drought of 2002 and 2004. Most families gave up between 2004 and 2006. Three families - a Prajapati, a Pandit and a Vishwakarma - were the last to go,' says Devendra Gandhi, a youth who used to do social work in the village."

HOW ARE WOMEN AFFECTED BY MIGRATION?

There has been a great deal of literature on the experiences of migrant labour in the place of destination. However, not enough work seems to have been done in capturing the physical burdens and the psychological stress of such migration on those left behind, especially the women left behind. This remains largely undocumented.

During our travels through the three districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur, we had the occasion to see the deserted courtyards of many villages, with the characteristic chain and padlock on the door signifying the departure of a family here or there. In one Ahirwar village in Lalitpur that we visited in the punishing summer of 2011, the villagers explained

how their wells had almost completely dried up and how their cattle were dying in the fields because they couldn't spare any water for them. The women showed us their feet, with the cracked skin on their soles, on which they travelled for kilometres every day to get one pitcher of water for the household.

Finally, we were taken on a round of houses in the village of those who had gone away. As they gave us the names of those who had left, it sounded like a tragic roll call ringing the knell of once-thriving neighbourhoods. The few able-bodied men who had remained in that village did so only on account of some personal reasons – one had to look after his aged parents, another had suffered an illness and was too weak to travel. But clearly every resident had considered the option of migrating out of the village, at least for a short spell.

We also found that many of the aged in the village have been left without any support under such circumstances. One case came to our attention of a feeble, old woman who had had practically nothing to eat and had obviously not drunk any water either for the whole day. All she could do was to sit near the door of her hutment, waiting for a passerby kind enough to draw out some water from the well for her. Her husband had died long ago and her three sons and their families had migrated for work, leaving the old woman to carry on as best as she could.

In Udotpura village of Jalaun district, Brij Kunwar – who had been left physically challenged by a childhood polio attack – revealed how two of her young sons in their late teens have migrated for a livelihood. One of them cut his hand very badly while working in a biscuit factory in Surat, Gujrat. Although he received

some treatment, his hand has remained crooked ever since that accident. Brij Kunwar's neighbours described how traumatised she was when she first got the news that her son had suffered a grievous injury. They said she wouldn't eat for two days, so afraid was she that she had lost him forever. In the old days, there was hardly any communication between the family members left behind and those who migrated. One old woman, recalling those times, remembered how all she did in those days when her husband went off to work on a cotton field in Maharashtra was to "work and wait, work and wait". Then after months, her husband would turn up outside the door but meanwhile she had to put up with every reversal that came her way, including the death of a baby. Today, with mobile phones, there is a better chance of families keeping in touch, but, of course, there can be no wishing away the distance. The fact is that should an emergency occur, the men cannot return in time to handle it and it is the women who have had to cope with major problems that cropped up, without the required resources or the knowledge on how to address them.

Case Study: Child Head of Household - Sita Devi Kumari Verma

We visited the village of Bangra, in Sarila block of Hamirpur district. There are 372 families in this village, and the Parmarth baseline survey indicated that Bangra has a population of 2,145 and 331 households, with 486 people belonging to the SC community. There are also 27 Brahmin families and 50 Muslim families living here.

Bangra has had to deal with severe water scarcity: Of the 14 hand pumps in here, only six have acceptable quality water, the rest

have brackish water. So, in effect, 331 homes are dependent on these six hand pumps. As the pressure on the few hand pumps with potable water builds up, fights regularly break out and these invariably are waged along community lines.

The village also has three ponds, at least on paper. One is located right at the entrance of the village and is so dirty that people refer to it as a "*nullah*" or drain. It is only in the direst need that women go there to wash the clothes or bathe; the second one – which lies at the centre of the village – is larger and a little cleaner but is so frequently used for bathing that the quality of its water cannot be guaranteed; the third is completely dry.

Bangra is one of those "lucky" villages that have a dedicated overhead tank of 10,000 litres capacity. Pipelines to it were laid in end-2010 and 11 tap stands were also installed, five of which were in the SC neighbourhood. In December 2010, the Jal Nigam began water supply to the village, but after a few days the taps inexplicably ran dry. According to the local people, the pipes installed are of substandard quality and have sprung leaks.

If Bangra has a deficit of water, so too have the fields that surround it, that brings agricultural operations, and the livelihoods supported by them, to a standstill. This has meant that many able-bodied adults in the village have been forced to leave to look for work elsewhere – a trend that has had great consequences for many in the village, like Sita Devi Kumari Verma.

This 13-year-old girl is a resident of Bangra and part of a large family consisting of her

parents and three siblings – an elder brother, Inder, 18, a young brother, Hardeepak 10, and a youngest sister, 7-year-old Sushma. Next door to her home live her grandparents, aunts and uncles and several cousin brothers.

Sita's parents, like many others in the village, go away for eight months every year, leaving the household responsibilities on her young shoulders. At the time, Sita not only runs this home single-handedly, she is also responsible for the care of Hardeepak and Sushma.

For any ordinary 13-year-old this would indeed be a daunting task, but Sita has been doing this for two years now because her parents and elder brother travel to faraway Delhi to earn money for the family. The joint family owns 20 bighas of farmland, but after all her father's brothers got their share of parental property, the tiny portion that came to her father was not enough to support the family, more so in times of drought when nothing could be cultivated on the plot. So every year, after Diwali, which could fall either at the end of October or early November, the elders in the family pack their bags and head out, only to return months later, around the June or July of the next year.

It's a lonely existence for the three youngsters left behind. Talk to Sita, and she will reveal that when her parents first left her, she used to feel very dispirited for weeks after their departure. But two years have made all the difference, she says, "I am now more used to the

situation. I do miss my mother every day but I know my parents have to go. All of us have growing needs; how else will my father manage to provide for us? They actually do back-breaking work on construction sites in the city to send us some money. By looking after the home, I am doing my bit and that makes me happy."

At an hour when most teenagers, especially her counterparts in cities, are fast asleep, Sita is up and about, and that too without anyone having to wake her up. "I get up 5 am because there is a lot of work to be done before I leave for school at eight in the morning. We don't

**AT AN HOUR WHEN
MOST YOUNGSTERS
HER AGE ARE FAST
ASLEEP, SITA IS UP AND
ABOUT AND THAT
TOO WITHOUT ANYONE
HAVING TO WAKE
HER UP**

have a latrine at home so it takes us around an hour to go to some far-away open field. Once back, I like to spend some time studying and I make Sushma sit with me so that I can help her out with her class work. Then I cook the morning meal and make sure that Har-

deepak and Sushma get ready although their school doesn't start before 10," she says.

Without any assistance, it's certainly not an easygoing daily grind for Sita but she goes about completing her chores systematically. For the 13-year-old, it is the chore of sourcing water that is the most challenging.

Water, of course, is the bane of everyone's existence in Bangra, because of the acute shortage of hand pumps with usable water. Every morning, Sita hears fights between the women at the hand pump. But the time when these fights reach fever pitch is during the

height of summer when groundwater levels plummet in the region – and, of course, during the agricultural operations of winter.

Now in this on-going water crisis, imagine Sita's hardships. There is a hand pump just a few paces from her front door – though its water is a little '*khara*' (brackish) – and she is up at the crack of dawn so that she is one of the first to fill water. Why would she be in a hurry to fill the five buckets she needs for her morning activities when the hand pump is right outside her home? Says Sita, "I am always tense during the morning. I want to beat the crowd that starts building up from 7 am because of the problem of untouchability that we still face in our village. There are at least 20 women from the Sahu, Muslim, Khangar and Parihar communities that line up outside my house. They all come by turns and put their buckets or vessels near the hand pump, making sure that their container doesn't touch those of the others. And, god forbid, if a Muslim woman's vessel touches that of a Sahu, even by accident. They will immediately throw out all the water and start filling afresh! So much time is wasted. When I am getting late for school, I try to convince someone to let me take some water first, but it's such a headache. That's when I really wish my mother was there to handle all this."

Sita personally does not think that one community touching the water of another amounts to polluting it. But she is still young and relatively untouched by the caste divisions that mark life in Bangra. Yet, she cannot escape the social tensions underlying this disturbing scenario because it is so much a part of life in this village.

Sita is, in fact, a bright child and enjoys going

to school – Hindi, Maths and English are her favourite subjects. Despite the household burdens on her young shoulders she usually manages to complete all her work and reach school, which is a 15-minute walk away, in time for her first class at 8.30 am.

Every Monday, when her parents call on her grandfather's phone from Delhi, she is eager to share with them the progress she has made in school. She also tells them about the financial situation of the household, and they send across money when she needs it. "I eagerly wait for their call every Monday night. I don't have a mobile phone but my father calls on my grandfather's phone. We talk about school, of the happenings in the village, and they even ask if I need any money," she adds. In the absence of her parents, Sita handles the home finances. Her father leaves her an amount of around Rs 3,000. With that she buys rations or school supplies or anything else they may need. She has learnt to live within her means – and tries to keep food at home simple dal or a seasonal vegetable and rotis is what she generally cooks, "although my younger siblings are always coaxing me to make them some sweets or fried savouries."

By the time Sita comes back from school at 2pm, she is quite exhausted. All she wants to do is relax but she can't afford to do that. Before the younger children return at four she has to prepare some snack for them after which she is, once again, at the hand pump. She needs at least two buckets for the evening. It takes several minutes of moving the hand pump handle up and down before water comes out when the pressure is low, so she spends a good hour doing this. By 4.30 pm, the village women are back for another round of water collection and she knows she will

have to get her requirement of water before they arrive. Sita finishes all her tasks, including the evening meal for the three siblings that now constitute the family. It gets dark after that and since there is no power connection in Sita's home – although Bangra does have electricity – the day is almost done after the evening meal. As the three children retire for the night in their grandfather's home next door, Sita is already planning her next day, dreading her encounters at the hand pump. What she would really like is for the piped water supply in Bangra to be restored so that the burden of collecting water from the hand pump would end.

Listening to Sita, one can only wonder how closely her life and preoccupations mimic those of most adult women in this village. At a time when she should be living the carefree life of a child, she sounded at least 10 years older than she was because the scarcity of water has rendered her virtually an orphan with her parents migrating out of Bangra for at least eight months in a year. Being young, she is clearly vulnerable to unscrupulous forces of all kinds, yet apart from her old grandparents' presence there appears to be little safety net of any kind for young lives like hers.

Lack of water in Bangra is one of the push factors for the out-migration that has left its mark on most households, and water scarcity continues to dog the life of those left behind, even if they are merely children. Going by the extraordinary experience of Sita, it would ap-

pear that although the negative impacts of distress migration touch the lives of the most vulnerable within the village community, there is very little attention being paid to the social loss inherent in such situations. In fact, the authorities don't appear to have even a plan of action to address such situations, forget actual interventions on the ground.

REFERENCES

Dogra, Bharat, 2007; Hunger, Thirst and Indebtedness –Bundelkhand's Deepening Agro-Ecological Crisis (Vol XLV No 24)

Deshingkar, Priya, 2003; Circular Internal Migration and Development in India, Overseas Development Institute, London

Deshingkar, P and Stuart, D, 2003; Seasonal Migration for Livelihoods in India: Coping, Accumulation and Exclusion, Working Paper 220, Overseas Development Institute, London

AIF, 2006; Locked Homes and Empty Schools, Zubaan, New Delhi

Jaiswal, Pankaj, November 1, 2006; Hindustan Times

2002 BPL Survey Data; Poverty among SC and ST rural households in Bundelkhand

BundelkhandInfo.org

Uttar Pradesh Human Development Report 2007

Beneria, Lourdes, 2011; Globalization, Labour, and Women's Work

WAY FORWARD: REDUCING THE VULNERABILITY OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY BY SECURING WOMEN'S WATER RIGHTS

Women – who have been discriminated over the ages; disempowered by social customs, practices and attitudes; undermined by ethnic identities, whether defined by caste or tribe; lacking in economic security and human developmental resources like education – cannot change their lives or realities unless they come together and act in ways that ultimately empower them, both as individuals and as a collective.

Typically, women feel helpless for various reasons, being under the control of forces and individuals over which or over whom they have no control. This very helplessness is the reason why they also lack the confidence and live in constant fear that they themselves or those they love and nurture could become objects of attack and assault at any point. It is such anxiety that has the potential of “killing the human spirit” according to Renana Jhabvala, head of the noted women's livelihood organisation, SEWA.

So what is needed in such a situation? Jhabvala has an answer: “empowerment”. How can

this empowerment come about? According to Jhabvala, the only way forward, is “organis-ing”, which she defines as a “process by which the powerless, or disempowered, can change their circumstances and begin to have control over their lives. It results in a change in the balance of power, living conditions and relationships. It puts fear behind.”

In this chapter, we would like to explore of the some ways by which this could be done, going by observations on the ground and by studying some of Parmarth's innovative interventions that have had an impact in Bundelkhand.

BRINGING WATER INTO MAINSTREAM DISCOURSE

The challenge in mainstreaming an issue like water is that it is not seen as an entitlement, or one that is important to struggle for, since it is largely taken for granted, just as women's labour in collecting water is also taken for granted, with no particular social or economic value attached to it. Of course, merely declaring that water is a human right does not ensure that there will be change on the ground,

in the short or even medium term. Instead, there is a need to critically assess the lack of institutions, mechanisms and norms that underlie the poor access to water. There is also a need to ensure greater stakeholder participation in determining how water should be allocated to all sections of the community, especially in situations of scarcity.

In other words, water rights should be mainstreamed and become part of customary norms. Access rights, most of which are presently informal, need to be secured as inviolable ones that are backed by social consensus at the local level. This is where building women's engagement with water, through the *pani panchayats* and *jal saheli* networks, as Parmarth is doing, becomes so important. So far, women's involvement in decision-making when it comes to water is completely absent in the functioning of the existing water systems in the three project districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur. There is also a conspicuous silence on the part of those who suffer the most from the consequences of an accountable and transparent system of water distribution, i.e., the women.

The local women we talked to in the course of this study rarely ventured any independent information on who decides where hand pumps should come up, where meetings that decide water use and access are held, who participates in them, and so on. They did not even know who they should call in case a hand pump breaks down or when the water in the tap disappears. Over the next three years, under this project, we hope this scenario will change dramatically, with women finding a voice and presence in decision-making, from the highest to the lowest levels, and ensuring

that their specific requirements are considered seriously and addressed.

In other words, we hope that women cutting across caste and community lines, emerge as a focus group that has the necessary knowledge, authority and legitimacy to negotiate on issues of water access at the community level. In her book, *Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry*, economist Bina Agrawal demonstrated the difference women's presence in the managing committees makes to the rules for protection, rule compliance, and the impact this has on the conservation of small forests (community forests in South Asia). She characterised it as "cooperative collective action" required in the daily management of community forests. This is a model that should, over time, come to apply for water management as well.

IMPORTANCE OF FIELD WORKERS INTERACTING WITH COMMUNITY WOMEN

Parmarth's interface with the community is mediated through its field workers at various tiers, going up to the team leaders. Our observations at the ground level indicate that the organisation has a good cadre of community workers. In order to remain relevant and respected, they in turn need to be trained on a regular basis in terms of the latest developments, both through information gathering at the ground-level and at the macro-level – as, for instance, in terms of changes in the law.

One cluster coordinator explained to us how she makes her entry into the community and wins the confidence of the women over a series of visits: "We introduce ourselves and ex-

plain why we have come. We first talk about issues that are related to cleanliness and sanitation. How to store food and water, why it should be kept covered at all times, and so on. We tell them how to look after the babies and children in terms of nutrition and sanitation, why it is important not to discriminate between daughters and sons, and how, daughters too, will bring them prosperity in the future.”

The challenge she faces on a regular basis is the high levels of illiteracy here, something that is not unexpected in a region where only a little over half the total number of women have had a few years of schooling. According to the Parmarth representative, at least 30% of those in the age group of 30 years and above are not literate, and require additional interaction because they are slower to grasp the need for change or understand the importance of fighting for their rights. This situation, fortunately, is changing. Now most girls are in school or have had at least eight years of schooling, a development that augurs well for the future articulation of an issue like water scarcity.

WATER-LIVELIHOOD LINKAGES THROUGH BETTER WATER MANAGEMENT

Putting the issue across in simple ways is very important for greater clarity. We learnt through our interactions that often the women themselves come up with ways to put across complex ideas in simple ways. In the village of Beelpur in Hamirpur district, for instance, we were struck by a woman called Mamta, who put across an important idea like “opportunity costs” in a simple way, without realising the importance of what she was say-

ing. She told us that in her free time she could make baskets of *arhar dal* stalks, which would bring her an additional income of Rs 50 a day. This money would help her children get better food. However, she doesn’t find the time to make these baskets because of her water collecting responsibilities and let’s go of an opportunity to earn this small but much-needed sum of money. In other words, she had actually monetised the price women in Beelpur village pay because of the poor quality of water in their neighbourhood.

It is, therefore, definitely a mistake to dismiss village women as an “ignorant lot”. Their experiences are required learnings for lasting solutions to emerge. We can never forget Raniya, again of Beelpur, who actually thought up a system that could supply her village with water, even when there is no electricity. She said, “Unlike in some villages, we have a pipeline. So why let it go waste? We need water supply that is not dependent on electricity because of the bad power situation in this area. For that we need to install an overhead tank near our village. When water is released from the original source, it would collect in this tank and then can be supplied to our homes through the pressure of gravity.” In other words, women understand the basic principles of better water management and their insights need to inform policy-making on water and sanitation.

Every village has some women, who are definitely quicker to understand the importance of the issue, identifying them is important. For instance, in the village of Bhimnagar, Madhogarh block of Jalaun, we came across 65-year-old Mula Devi. Once she was convinced about the important role that toilets can play to address the cases of jaundice, diarrhoea

and Japanese encephalitis in her village, she took the cause of building toilets as a personal crusade. Over the span of a few years, her activism translated into making sure that more than half the homes in this village of approximately 200 dwellings has a toilet, and nothing gives Mula greater pleasure than to conduct a guided tour through the narrow lanes, pointing to the toilets that have now mushroomed everywhere. On the issue of sanitation, ownership of the concern, as in the case of Mula Devi, is vital.

We also found that school-going teenagers have the potential to be agents of change within the village, especially in terms of water and sanitation. They are literate, have basic numeracy and are impatient to change their realities. For instance, in the village of Bangra, in Hamirpur district's Sarila block, we came across Sita Devi Kumari Verma, who although just 13 is running a household independently because her parents have migrated out for work. We found that she had a good understanding of the local problems of water collection and was extremely articulate in her assessments. Girls like Sita need to be mobilised, not just because they bring fresh insights and energy into solving local water problems, but because they constitute the future. It is they who will have to cope with water scarcity and lack of provisioning, as adults, in the years to come.

Through the *jal saheli* and *pani panchayat* network, Parmarth's representatives are build-

ing a cadre of women that is more articulate and literate. While choosing the members, certain qualities have been kept in mind and the idea is to keep building their capacity over time: The representatives should be consensus builders rather than those who cause division; they should be systematically provided with regular and timely information on the topographical and other features of the region, its water sources, the technology of water distribution, the authorities in charge of water distribution, and so on. Moreover, they

should also have information on the rights of women, and the special entitlements of communities from SC/ST backgrounds, as well as insights into how the *panchayati raj* works and the three tiers that mark its functioning.

We interacted with the members of a *pani panchayat* in the village of Sopta, Jalaun district. What was interesting to note was that though they came from various communities, they could sit together and talk about water concerns. One Sarojini Devi, although from a high caste Rajput background underlined the fact that "everybody in the *pani panchayat* was equal and all decisions were being taken after discussion, together". Incidentally, the majority of members of that *pani panchayat* were from SC backgrounds. Sarojini Devi's words signify the possibility of women being able to transcend their caste and religious identities and come together for a common cause.

Village women also quickly realise the importance of forming collectives and making the

**AFTER AN INTERACTION
WITH A PANI PANCHAYAT
WE NOTED THAT AL-
THOUGH MEMBERS
CAME FROM DIFFERENT
CASTES, THEY COULD
SIT TOGETHER AND
TALK OF WATER**

connections between water access and livelihoods. We noticed that in Udotpura village, the Parmarth's representative had gone door-to-door, motivating women to raise their voices together before the authorities. At first, there was some hesitation because the women did not even see the possibility of getting the “*neta-log*” (the political decision makers) to listen to them. But once it was explained to them that their voices did matter; that there was nobody to speak for them unless they spoke for themselves, they grasped the point quickly.

Meenakshi, a young woman from Udotpura, after listening to the words of encouragement from the Parmarth representative, exclaimed, “*Ab toh aisa samay aa gaya hai ki hum Dalit*

play insights and a hunger for greater participation in decision-making, most of them have either never had a chance to do so or have been dissuaded from doing so by circumstances and family members. The figures that emerged in the Parmarth baseline survey for this project in terms of women's participation in the public space was striking. Apart from a nominal presence in committees dealing with cleanliness at the local level, the participation of women from the project districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur in any decision making committee, forget panchayat or gram sabha, is extremely low. This scenario can potentially change greatly if Parmarth continues to building women *jal saheli* and pani panchayat networks and bring younger and more articulate women into this process.

Women's Participation in Public Space*		
From project districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur, Lalitpur		
	Participants	Non-Participants
Cleanliness Committees	148	1967
Membership of any other committee	12	2071
Membership of any committee or panchayat	72	2055
Participation in panchayat or any other organising meeting	55	2066
Participation in gram sabha meetings	21	2007
* Parmarth's Baseline Survey for the European Union supported project, 'Establishing Women's First Right to Water Resources'		

auraton ko hi mil kar pradhan ke paas apni baat rakhni hogi. Main toh do muddon par aawaz uthana chati hoon – pehla, paani, aur doosra, auraton ke liye rozgar.” (Now the time has come for us Dalit women to get together and approach the Pradhan with our problems. I would like to raise my voice on two issues – water and livelihood for women.) Despite the fact that individual women dis-

IMPORTANCE OF INTERVENING AT THE LOCAL LEADERSHIP LEVEL

Among the constant complaints we heard from women on the ground was the lack of interest that panchayat leaders demonstrate towards their water woes. For instance, the women from Udotpura complained loudly

that “no one listens to us”, and the women from Beelpur, who knew the name of the village sarpanch – Gajraj Singh – complaint that he met only with a few people, and, obviously, only the men. As they put it, “When we try to tell him about our problems, he quickly comes up with a standard reply: ‘Don’t worry, we are working on it’, but nothing happens after that.”

This is why one component of the present project, mobilising elected panchayat representatives, especially women representatives, on the issue of women’s first rights to water resources, is very important. The aim of such interactions and interventions is to build, in a structured way, the capacities of local women leaders and to make them more sensitive to the water concerns of ordinary people, especially those of marginalised communities. In our interactions we found that there is a general lack of understanding about the role these leaders can play and even the powers vested in them to help the village women and prod the engineers and officials in charge of the water supply. Pani panchayats, on their part, have to be pro-active in following up on their complaints, and that needs that those who constitute them should have an established familiarity with their local representatives.

There is, going by our observations, also a general ignorance about the culture of water harvesting, as also the need to reclaim wastelands and conserve common property resources,

both among the village women and panchayat representatives. There is, therefore, great scope

for both entities to work in closer proximity on these emerging issues, too. In other words, the link between gram panchayats, pani panchayats and the general community, which is being set up under this project, is an extremely important one. It expedites a direct connection between the

articulation of problems on the ground and policy-making at the panchayat, gram panchayat and higher levels.

WOMEN’S FIRST RIGHT TO WATER RESOURCES: SOME STRATEGIES

Four innovative ways that Parmath has adopted to bring changes on the ground, at the village level, at the level of the village and local authorities, and at the mass level

At The Village Level: Building capacities in women on sustainable water use

For the local women of Itaha Kalpi village in Jalaun district, as in villages everywhere in project districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur, procuring water has emerged as the single biggest task of their day. Ask them when they get some rest and they will ironically retort, “Only when we die.” But today the women of Itaha Kalpi are more aware of their water resources and entitlements than their counterparts in other villages in the area. What made the difference?

THE AIM IS TO BUILD, IN A STRUCTURED WAY, THE CAPACITIES OF LOCAL WOMEN LEADERS AND MAKE THEM MORE SENSITIVE TO THE WATER CONCERNS OF ORDINARY WOMEN

Itaha Kalpi has been a village where Parmarth has been working for several years now and which can actually provide a model for the other villages the organisation hopes to assist under the present project. We spoke to Parmarth's cluster coordinator for this village, who has been coming here for the last three years, to get an idea of how it all began.

The very first step was setting up a discussion group. But even something as innocuous as that was a challenge here, because initially nobody wanted to sit together to talk. It was found that the women were too shy to speak before the men, and retreated behind their long ghunghats. That's when it was decided to have a separate women's group.

Once the discussion group was set up, invariably the main issue that figured was that of water, especially drinking water, availability. However, when the women were asked where their existing water resources were, they didn't have a clue. They couldn't say how many hand pumps were there in the village or the total number of wells in the area. Even women who had come to the village as brides a quarter of a century ago, did not perceive their immediate neighbourhood in any precise way.

That's when the idea of mapping the area gathered force. Everybody shared their knowledge of the village and drew their immediate vicinity on the floor. Once the map took shape, everybody could see for themselves the lie of the land. They could see that while one locality in the village may have a couple of hand pumps, another had none. How some wells had brackish water and how that meant that the women living around them had have to go further in search of drinking water. Slowly, the number of those who lived in the

village became evident. The women discovered that Itaha Kalpi had 427 male and 397 female residents; that there were 98 Other Backward (OBCs) and the rest were Dalits.

The women in village had a tradition of making *rangoli* patterns outside their lintels, especially on festive occasions. So they brought this talent to their map-making. Different colours were used to denote different things: Black from charcoal powder, denoted "*pakki sadak*", or paved roads. Brick powder indicated bricked roads, while pink chalk powder was for mud tracks, or "*katchchi sadak*". Green dots indicated houses, blue circles represented wells, and blue arrows pointed to hand pumps. In this way, an idea of the village in its entirety was established for everyone. As one woman put it to us, "We now understood why it took some of us so much longer to fill our buckets, than others."

The Parmarth representative then told the women that the authorities would not listen to one woman, but if they came together as a group, they had a better chance of being heard. By themselves they were nothing, but if 20 of them spoke together on something, it would become an issue. That was how the women of Itaha Kalpi came together across caste lines and set up a Self-Help Group (SHG). They now drew their maps on the chart paper their children used at school, so that they could take their map around and show it to others in the village – and most importantly – to administrators and decision-makers at the district level.

In 2009, the village women petitioned their pradhan and the authorities agreed to fill a dried up pond with water. That was not all. A dharna (sit in) was organised outside the Dis-

trict Magistrate's (DM) office, during which the women took their empty clay pitchers and broke them before the DM. This was in 2010 and the action had an immediate impact: Two hand pumps were re-bored and two wells were cleaned.

When earlier nobody ever saw themselves as being able to argue their case before the authorities, now many realised that they could argue their case even before a high official like a DM. A lot of inhibitions and fears were shed in the process. They also got more knowledge about finances. They now know that they are supposed to receive a minimum wage on government work sites, for instance, but in fact receive only half that amount, or sometimes nothing at all. They know how much has been earmarked for the development of their village, and so on. They have also learnt to raise their voices before authority, something they had never done before. One young woman,

Hemlata, told us triumphantly, "We shouted at the officials, saying it is our right to get our full wages on the government work site." Another woman smiled and revealed, "I told them I needed to pay for rakhis for my brothers, so they had better pay me!"

All the women in Itaha Kalpi now know that in order to live better lives they, first of all, need access to water; and that since women have had to spend a good part of their lives collecting it, they should have the first right to it. As one woman put it, "If we spend all our time hauling water like cattle, we be-

come cattle. But we are human beings and it is time they gave us water – water to drink, water for our animals, water for our farms."

The maps of Itaha Kalpi have taught the women here many things. Above all, it has given them a voice.

At the level of village and local administration: Strengthening participation

The village of Bangra in Sarila block of Hamirpur district suffered from great water scarcity. Although it had a dedicated overhead tank of 10,000 litres capacity, the pipelines connecting the village to tank were

**ONE WOMAN SAID,
"THIS WATER IS IMPOSSIBLE TO USE. IF IT IS
POURED INTO MILK, IT
CURDLES. AFTER A
BATH A WHITE RESIDUE
IS LEFT ON THE SKIN"**

of inferior quality and had sprung leaks. Of the 14 hand pumps in the village, only six have acceptable quality water, the rest have only brackish water. As one woman described this water, "It is impossible to use. If this poured into milk, it curdles. If you use it for

your bath, the soap does not lather and a white residue is left on your skin." This meant, in effect, that the 410 households in Bangra were dependent on six hand pumps and fights regularly broke out, many of them along religious and caste lines, with the possibility of these leading to even bigger conflagrations.

Parmarth representatives, who had been interacting with the villagers for a while and enjoyed a degree of confidence, encouraged them to come together and take their problems to the authorities. But the inertia, borne

out of several years of neglect, made for a poor response. As one villager told us, “We have submitted many applications to fix the village’s water problem. The officials just assure us that they will do something, but nothing happens. So we are left to our own devices. Many of us buy water from the local trader even though we cannot afford it.”

But the Parmarth representatives continue to persist. They explained to the men and women of Bangra that their strength really lay in their numbers and that the key to getting their demands addressed was to continue putting pressure on the authorities at higher levels. A signature petition was circulated, to which many villagers attached their signatures or offered their thumb prints. However, when there was talk of organising a meeting with the Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM) at Sarila to submit the signature petition, there was a noticeably less enthusiastic response. Many were afraid; others, clearly fazed, pleaded personal reasons to escape taking part in the action.

Finally, however, this meeting did take place. About 20 villagers mounted a jonga and were transported to the office of SDM Ram Vir Singh. What was extremely educative was to see unexpected leadership qualities in women exert themselves. For instance, there was Bangra resident, Manjulata. The fact that she was an anganwadi worker and educated, had clearly made a difference. Not only did she personally hand over the signature petition to the SDM, when he tried to turn the ta-

bles on the villagers, accusing them of indulging in wasting water and mishandling government infrastructure, she denied the charge and gave the official a clear idea of how deeply stressed Bangra’s residents, especially women, were because of the unavailability of

water. At the end of her brief intervention, the SDM had no alternative but to pick up the phone and talk to his colleagues in the water department.

This action demonstrated again the importance of bringing people together, across

the lines of caste, religion and gender, to focus effectively on water entitlement

At the Mass Level: A two-week rally for women’s first right to water

A rally for water, aptly called *Pani Bachao Abhiyaan Yatra*, that linked up 69 villages in the three project districts, provides a good model for how individual challenges in water access can be scaled up to the district-level through innovative messaging and cultural programmes. In contrast to village-level interventions that are spread out over time and require intensive interaction on the ground, these are immediate and broad-scale dispersal of key transformative ideas that could capture the interest and imagination of people at a mass level. Parmarth conducted the rally simultaneously within a span of two weeks in the three districts and 69 villages were covered all together. What was particularly striking about this intervention was the attempt to raise general awareness about water conservation and

**AT THE END OF HER
BRIEF INTERVENTION,
THE SDM HAD NO
ALTERNATIVE BUT TO
TALK TO HIS
COLLEAGUES IN THE
WATER DEPARTMENT**

rights through cultural means that could be termed as both educative and entertaining. Bundelkhandi songs that talked about the environment, colourful posters, and eye-stopping street theatre, were all part of this rally.

This model of intervention has the advantage of linking the decision-makers with the affected population. While on the one hand, Parmarth made every effort to involve the local authorities to inaugurate and participate as chief guests in various programmes that were a part of the rally; on the other, a close dialogue was maintained with the community at the village level. There were immediate positive impacts as well. For instance, during the closing ceremony at the Bamhaurisar panchayat of Talbehat block, the Chief Guest and Block Development Officer (BDO) Bikas Kumar Mishra invited Parmarth to prepare the design for a soak pit toilet and submit an estimation of how much it would cost. He assured participants that he, on his part, will do his best to get these toilets installed.

At the mass level: A public hearing for equity and justice for women

A public hearing we attended at Talebehat, Lalitpur, in which women from the villages of Sahipur, Asaupura, Budawani, Jamalpur, Jamalpur, Vijayapura and Lalaun, went public with the water crisis they were experiencing, displayed the benefits of awareness raising and collective action. Many of the women from participating villages were from the tribal community, with little education and less exposure to the public space. Yet, they conducted themselves with great poise and dignity, as they laid their problems before the senior officials who had come to hear them.

When one of the officials claimed that the district's water problems had been solved because it had seven dams, one woman calmly got up and described all the trouble she encountered in getting even one pot of water that her children could drink. She talked about rusted hand pumps, the fights that break out over water, and the hours they spend queuing up for water. By the time she finished, the official who had claimed that "Lalitpur's water problems had ended", had to hurriedly assure her that he will do his best to try and ease her water burdens.

This interaction between the Up Zilla Magistrate and a village woman, with her sari draped over her head, presented a remarkable sight and was a striking symbol of potential transformation if women understood their entitlements and came out to articulate their concerns.

WATER RIGHTS ARE EMBEDDED IN SOCIAL RIGHTS

Social action, if effective, should lead to changing power relations between men and women within the family and between ordinary village residents and administrators and the government, within the larger system. Such change could meet with resistance, even violence. Handling the impacts and consequences of social transformation requires a sense of confidence, personal growth, and an ability to process information and take decisions in a mature and democratic manner. Ultimately, the women whom Parmarth is reaching out to, through this project, will have to be empowered in a way that enables them not just to take the right decisions for themselves and their communities, but to take charge of their lives and destinies.

Parmarth, which has been working in the Bundelkhand region since the mid-nineties, has always adopted a women-centric approach to its interventions. Early programmes included the setting up of women's Self-Help Groups, assistance to women farmers, setting up of kishori mandals (for adolescents girls) to check early marriage and encourage education for girls, as well as mahila mandals (for women) to help address their problems and enhance livelihood possibilities.

In the present project, it is focusing on promoting water-livelihood linkages among women as a first step to changing the equations on the ground. At present, Parmarth has been able to bring over 1,500 women into pani *panchayats* at the village level, and helped 140 *jal sahelis* (or water partners) to emerge as women activists for water.

Simultaneously, efforts are on to build community awareness of this issue through public campaigns, hearings and rallies. As one Parmarth representative put it, "We are some months into this project and already progress has been made. Of course, it is going to be tough to break age-old traditions and change feudal mindsets, but at least women here are slowly beginning to realise the need to do something to change their lives – and the drudgery of water collection is very much a prime concern for them."

The prevailing patriarchal order with its ideology of female seclusion ensures, on the one hand, that women are responsible for the care and nurture of all members of the household;

on the other, it also ensures that women are not given space or voice in the public sphere, denied freedom of mobility and do not receive due acknowledgement of their contributions to the home and community – even if they labour for 18 hours at a stretch, as we have seen in some cases.

If this situation is to change within the home, women need to emerge more forcefully and emphatically outside of it. Women here need to gain the confidence to go out and confront officials, even a magistrate at the district headquarters. Creating capacities for such action will have its own dynamic and the demand for land rights could be an important component of this. According to available data, only 2.6% of women in UP own property and only 7.1% have bank accounts in their

**IF THIS SITUATION HAS
TO CHANGE WITHIN
THE HOME, WOMEN
NEED TO EMERGE
MORE FORCEFULLY
AND EMPHATICALLY
OUTSIDE OF IT**

own name. Both figures suggest that women have very little scope for participation in family decision-making, even with regard to the use of the money that their labour has helped to generate. This, in turn, has a direct link with the occurrence of do-

mestic violence. According to figures cited by Bina Agarwal in an article, the incidence of violence is 49% among women without property, and it comes down to 18% when a woman owns land and 7% when she owns both land and a home.

The issue of better access to water then is embedded in larger social issues and themes. These, too, will have to be addressed along with the efforts to establish women's first right

to water resources. Only then will women in Bundelkhand, over time, come to acquire not just greater agency, but autonomy and empowerment as well.

REFERENCES

- Jhabvala, Renana, 2011; Poor Women Organizing for Economic Justice*
- Agarwal, Bina, 2010; Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry*
- Agarwal, Bina, 2005; Landmark Step In Gender Equality, The Hindu*
- Human Development Report 2011: Sustainability and Equity – A Better Future For All*
- Mishra, Nripendra Kishore Mishra, Tulika Tripathi; Conceptualising Women's Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment*
- Jain, Devaki and Diane Elson, 2011; Harvesting Feminist Knowledge for Public Policy*
- Dogra, Bharat; Parmarth – Strengthening Vulnerable Communities, Protecting Rural Livelihoods (pamphlet)*
- Kulkarni, Seema, 2011; Women and Decentralised Water Governance: Issues, Challenges and Way Forward*

Disclaimer : The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan, Orai, and Women's Feature Service, New Delhi, and should in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.



Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan

Mona House, Churkhi Road, Orai, District Jalaun, Uttar Pradesh
Tel/Fax: 05162-258412/254910
Email: parmarths@gmail.com, parmarthorai@gmail.com
Website: www.parmarthindia.org