

## ***The Best Part of the Story***

By Keya Acharya

The landscape is barren in parts with just high heat and sun-bleached sand, the hallmarks of wastelands; in other parts there is some semblance of agriculture, with jowar, bajra and sometimes castor growing in small patches of mild green, without the lushness that good watering provides.

And in the middle of this landscape there appears, like an oasis without the accompanying palms, the 'Tinnavahd talab', a drinking water pond constructed by the community at Rabarkar vand, near Lakhagarh village in Rapar taluk of Kutch district. Inside the pond there is a dug well, constructed on the pond bed.

The pond took 8 people 4 days to cut all the invading scrub of prosopis juliflora, 5 days to clear out debris and stones, 16 days of tractor-loads to cart away the debris and bring back earth to form the sloped bunding at the sides and cost Rs. 102,000. The money was given by Arghyam to the Samerth Trust to facilitate the construction.

Arghyam has supported, through the Samerth Trust, 16 vands, or hamlets, with drinking water systems of earthen check dams and dugwells, in Rapar taluk.

Tinnavahd talab was constructed in 2007. The site was chosen by the community at Rabarkar themselves. " We chose this place because it was near our homes and it would fill up in 1-2 days whenever it rained", says 35-year-old Mohan Dhanna, president or pramukh of the water association or Pani Samiti formed with the help of Samerth for monitoring and maintenance of the pond.

And now, a near-wonder in a place of acute water scarcity, the groundwater has recharged even in the vand's nearby well. Water is found here at 12 feet, when in previous years was dry. The well itself is 8 years old with a total depth of 50 feet: it has been dry for at least 5 of those 8 years.

The pond itself is about a third full, less than the previous two years because of the very little rains this year. But the good thing is that the dugwell inside the pond has not gone dry in the whole year. Which means that the community has had drinking water all the year round: a very unusual feat in these parts.

Khetabhai Dhanabhai, the 40 year-old treasurer of the Pani Samiti shades his eyes with his hand and looks beyond the water.

“ We are now thinking of digging deeper to conserve more water”, he says.

Dhanabhai has 30 acres of land in an amount sounding vast, but shared with brothers and family members, a vand dweller holds anywhere from 4-10 acres of arid lands handed down by family before him. In good years, 2 acres of land yields an average 20 quintals ( 200 kgs) of produce. The problem is those ‘good years’ are few, once in 5 years if you’re lucky.

Dhanabhai also shows with the arc of his arm a radius around the pond. “ There is about 500 feet of recharge area around this pond”, he says. “ We are also thinking of more groundwater recharge so that we can use it for agriculture”.

The community has been living for 50-odd years here in Rabarkar, yet Dhanabhai does not remember having water in his vand even as a child. He says he also remembers seasonal migration from his childhood: when the community would leave the vand for at least 4-6 months in the dry season and migrate elsewhere in search of water and work.

And yet, here he is today, looking ahead !

About 50 km away from Rabarkar is Chakasri vand, on the outskirts of Kidianagar village where the local panchayat is based. The story here gets even better, having started in 2004 with the help of Samerth Trust and Swissaid. The community of 19 families with a population of 120 got together and formed a pani samiti that constructed a pond for agriculture use. They asked everyone in the vand to help; those saying they could not due to other constraints had to pay Rs. 100 a day to the samiti so that others working in their stead could get paid. The two main officer bearers supervised the work: it took 5 men and 15 days to clear the ‘babul’, [prosopis juliflora] and a total 21 days of ‘tractor work’.

“ After the talab we started thinking”, says Poppatbhai DHINGA, pani society member. “ Previously we couldn’t even think of the next day; all we did was try to make some charcoal for a living”, he says. Now the water for irrigation has given them both food security and a livelihood income, thanks to Swissaid.

But, as a demonstration that water for agriculture and livelihoods is closely linked to drinking water, the community continued to face

hardship accessing drinking water. The men would travel distances to Kathiawar near the Rann of Kutch in search of fresh water while the women would dig 'veerdas' or shallow troughs in the nearest dried up river bed, to scoop out water.

" The pani society then wanted one pond solely for drinking water", says DHINGA.

The drinking water pond, constructed with financial support from Arghyam and help from Samerth, took 20 days of labour and 10 days of 'tractor work', removing scree away from the site and returning with earth for bunding.

The water now serves not just the vand community but surrounding neighbours and the roving Maldhari tribesmen with their herds of cattle. " The waters really get depleted when they come with herds in their hundreds but we don't refuse", says the pramukh.

The society now need to figure out how to handle the Maldhari herdsmen and their cattle without depleting their waters. Discussions are currently on in the pani samiti about the matter.

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