

KUNO INITIATIVE : AN UPDATE (II)

Samrakshan Trust, July 2001

Here is the latest update on the watershed situation as well as the general status of relocation in Kuno, based on my stay there over the last 40 days. I was there to help the field team in the general planning process, as well as work with mobilization of women and other aspects like initiating work with gram sabhas, micro-credit and so on.

Watershed Development

The good news is that there have been a couple of very good pre-monsoon showers in the region around May 20th, as a result of which the acute water scarcity that the area faced in the summer got mitigated somewhat. The water harvesting structures (loose stone checkdams) that had been built by the people of Khallai and Chhoti Khajuri have turned out to be 100 per cent successful, and have managed to retain some water even from these initial showers. Work is now ongoing in many villages (including Khallai and Chhoti Khajuri) on digging open wells through funds being disbursed by the forest department, and once these wells are ready, there is a very high possibility of good recharge into the wells through the water retained in these checkdams. The wells are being dug as part of provision of irrigation facilities under the R&R package, and one well is sanctioned between every three families. The wages that these families received for digging wells (about Rs. 1800 per meter of well depth) have been an important source of ready cash, which has helped these families tide over the dry season without having to resort to borrowing from the local moneylenders. Moreover, the earth and stones that are dug out from the well site has been used by many villagers to bund their agricultural fields. This would help to retain rainwater in the fields, helping to enhance soil moisture and groundwater levels. As an aside, these rains have also helped to ease the drinking water and fodder situation for cattle, and as a result, the number of cattle deaths observed this year is significantly lower than last year.

In addition to the checkdams built in Khallai and Chhoti Khajuri, the villagers of Ahirwani have also got together to form their own village development society (or samiti, as they call it), and the first task that they undertook was to construct a series of 10 checkdams on a nallah that flows through their agricultural fields. Again, in the ensuing rains, the checkdams have managed to retain some water, and groundwater recharge is likely to go up after the rains arrive in earnest. Ahirwani has not yet got sanction from the forest department for digging wells, because the forest department did not have adequate funds for this purpose in the financial year ending March 2001. However, they are likely to start work on their wells after this kharif season, or maybe in the next dry season. In any case, for villages like Ahirwani, the dry season that just went by was spent on construction of their houses using the Rs.36,000 grant from the R&R package.

The other water harvesting structures that have come up in the region have been the three constructed by the forest department with technical advise from Action Aid India's NRM expert (whose visit to the area was facilitated through Samrakshan's efforts). These include two dams constructed on the river Kwari near Agraa and Meghpura (the Kushwaha dam and the Meghpura dam respectively), and the johad constructed near village Jakhoda.

The Kushwaha dam and Meghpura dam are almost complete, in the sense that the main dam is ready but before I returned, work on the wing walls was nearing completion. Both dams now have water in their natural ponding area, and this water body stretches in each case up to at least a kilometre upstream of the dam site. At most places, the average depth of the water body is between 1.5 to 2.5 meters (the dams themselves are around 1 meter high), and in places, water up to the depth of 4 to 5 meters is also accumulated. What this effectively means is that in the next dry season, there would be water in these bodies till at least the month of May, and this water would also be available for use in the lift irrigation systems that the forest department is

planning to lay out for some of the villages whose land lies next to this water body. The forest department plans to have at least two or three lift systems in place by the time the rabi crop is likely to be planted, and then we will swing into action along with the department to familiarize the people with the nitty-gritty of the working of lift systems. Our work in this regard would have been fairly intensive, because management of the lift systems has to be handled, over time, almost entirely by the village community, and a whole lot of work needs to go into working out the systems of management and water sharing for this purpose.

A spin off of the retention of water in these dams is that there is now the possibility of enhancement of livelihoods at least for some villages through pisciculture in these water bodies. For this purpose again, an extensive system would have to be worked out for benefit-sharing among and between villages through community-based groups like co-operatives, and we are planning to sit across over the next couple of months with the forest department and the concerned village communities to work out the modalities involved.

The third water harvesting structure, the Jakhoda johad, is a semi-circular earthen structure built on the foothills of a hill that lies above Jakhoda's agricultural land. Its purpose again is to retain water that flows from the hill and the surrounding catchment area, which would have flown unchecked into numerous nallahs and eventually into the Kwari, and would have taken with it valuable topsoil and nutrients. The johad (which is about 120 meters in length, 2 meters high and about 4 meters wide at the top) would retain water in a huge pond, and this water would again recharge wells in the fields of Jakhoda lying downstream.

Once again, there are possibilities of pisciculture in the pond, and it would also be very useful for cattle from the relocated villages. In fact, many villages are already using the water stored from the first few rains for their cattle, as well as for washing and bathing purposes. Moreover, the enhanced soil moisture is also resulting in good growth of grass in the surrounding area, which is being used for grazing cattle.

Incidentally, the location and design of this structure was initially suggested by two experts from Tarun Bharat Sangh, whose visit to the area had been facilitated by Samrakshan way back in April 2000. Thereafter, inputs related to design were also provided by Action Aid's NRM expert.

An important aspect of these watershed works has been that wages for labourers working on these structures came at a time when the displaced villagers were facing acute scarcity due to the twin pressures of drought and displacement. Since there was a large component of earthwork in all three structures, at least 60 per cent of the funds spent on these structures (each of them cost about Rs.5-6 lakhs) has gone to the villagers in the form of wages. All these can be counted as the direct and indirect benefits of the watershed process that has been put in place in the displaced villages.

Community Participation in Watershed development - Village Ahirwani

For Ahirwani, the process of construction of checkdams was extremely interesting, and I was fortunate to have been around in the field when they did this, so I can give you a nearly first hand account of how things went.

From Samrakshan, it is Ritesh who handles work in Ahirwani under the new system we have now put in place, under which villages have been divided into clusters that Meraj, Vijay and Ritesh look after. Discussions on the merits of constructing checkdams had been going on in Ahirwani for at least a month or so before actual construction happened. This included meetings that Sanjeev Jain had with villagers during his visit, as well as regular discussions carried out by Ritesh during the course of his frequent village visits. The formal decision to dam the Ahirwani Nallah was taken by the villagers in the first meeting of the village samiti in end-May, during which Ritesh had been invited as an observer by the villagers. The villagers fixed June 6th as the day for work on checkdamming, and requested Ritesh to be present in the village on the 5th, along

with Vijay and the forest guard R.K. Narwaria, so that site selection could be done in advance for the checkdams. However, on the morning of the 5th, there were heavy rains in the area, as a result of which Ahirwani got cut off from Agra due to swelling of a nallah in between, as well as heavy water flow in the Kwari. We had nevertheless planned on reaching Ahirwani on the 6th morning, irrespective of whether the checkdams could be built or not. However, again on the 6th there were rains in the morning, and we could not reach Ahirwani. We figured that we would now have to postpone this work by at least a week.

However, the next morning, we got news from the forest guards that the people of Ahirwani went ahead on their own and constructed 10 checkdams on the Ahirwani Nallah on their own on the 6th itself ! We then found out further details, and got to know that on the morning of the 6th, first the women and children got out with their pickaxes and shovels, and rounded up the men to go to the nallah. They then proceeded to select sites on their own, and spent the entire day working on the checkdams. And all this even as it was raining!! Apparently, old women who could do little by way of carrying stones to the site also helped out, by ferrying drinking water to the other workers..... Subsequently, the same evening, Ahirwani experienced rains, which resulted in retention of water in the newly constructed checkdams.

Bad Plots of Agricultural land

The process of changing rocky plots has been rather tricky, and this is especially true of villages like Meghpura and Paira Adivasi, which have been out at the new site for over two years now. The problem is that because of inexperience of the forest department in the early period, and poor rains in the past two years, identification of rocky plots and subsequent changing of plots has been hanging fire. There have been instances of 4 or 5 plots having been changed in a village, but other villagers having been left out of the process because things were proceeding on a case-by-case basis and many people either did not come forward or their claim did not get due attention. Another problem is that some plots have very low topsoil depth, after which you reach the base rock, while other plots have adequate topsoil but too many loose stones and boulders which require arduous cleaning over a long period of time. Now the forest department agrees to change the plot in the former case, but not in the latter. In any case, the villagers have now begun demanding once again that their rocky plots should be changed, and assurances to this effect have also been given to them by the top officials of the forest department from the state government as well as the Center. Be that as it may, the approach that Samrakshan is now taking is to first organize the villagers with rocky plots into groups, and to follow up the cases on a collective basis rather than individual cases.

We have begun afresh a physical verification of each plot about which complaints have been received in Meghpura and in Paira Adivasi, to determine the extent of rockiness of the plots. We now plan to take the concerned forest guards with us on our rounds, and get them to state the official position on whether they agree about the need to change the plot. After this is done we would sit with the concerned Range Officer and the Surveyor (who possesses all maps of agricultural plots, including information about where surplus cultivable plots are available) and see how many claims can be adjusted in the vicinity of these villages. In case further claims are left which cannot be settled in the adjacent lands (and my hunch is that such cases would come up), these cases would then be forwarded by the Range Officer to the DFO, to be taken up at his level.

These would be complicated to handle, because we are talking here about villagers who have already used up Rs.36,000 to construct houses in the present villages, but may have to be allotted land at a distance, because not enough land is available nearby for them.

Most of the problem villages in this category come under the cluster that our team leader Merajuddin is handling, and he is spending his time looking into this issue on a priority basis. We will keep you posted about developments on this front as they happen.

Mobilization of the Community

Regarding mobilization and gram sabhas, the process of formation of samitis in each village takes place through a duly called meeting of the entire village body, and this can be seen as a formal gram sabha meeting. We are now focussing, as you may have gathered from our progress report, on the formation of such samitis in each of the displaced villages, so that increasingly, the samitis can articulate and direct the future course of action for the village as a whole. Technically, the gram sabha is nothing but the entire body of voters in each village. The challenge is to get the gram sabhas to function as vibrant institutions that guide the course of development of the village, and it is precisely this that we are now working on. In this process, there would be lots of nuances (like bringing out participation of the less vocal and more marginalized groups, delineating the powers of the gram sabha vis-a-vis the gram panchayat, getting gram sabhas involved in the process of social audit of development works being undertaken in their villages, and so on), and these are aspects that we are increasingly engaging ourselves with. In fact, I am looking out for a suitable training programme for Ritesh where he would learn the intricacies of the functioning and powers of gram sabhas, and related issues.

This is part of the in-house capacity development that we are envisaging for our field team. Already, you are aware that Vijay is looking at natural resource management as his area of specialization, while Meraj has just returned from a training in Participatory Rural Appraisal, and would now focus on micro-credit and self-help groups.

Problems related to Banks

We are also interacting closely with the Chambal Kshetriya Grammen Bank, a Regional Rural Bank based in Vijaypur, to initiate their micro-credit schemes for men and women in our villages over the next few months. More details of this as things become more concrete.....

Samrakshan's field infrastructure

The new office is now nearly ready, and we shifted there in early May. Some work is still left, which would hopefully be completed by the middle of July, but meanwhile we have also retained our pator in the Sahariya basti, and we use it for meals and other purposes. I would send you photographs of the new field office soon, or maybe I would be able to put them up on the new Samrakshan website soon.

I look forward to comments/queries about the information contained in this mail.

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Trustee