

## CONTENDING WATER USES

# Social Undercurrents in a Water-Scarce Village

*Conditions of water scarcity have been aggravated in Vadali village of Gujarat due to the persisting differences between higher castes, chiefly the ahirs, and those lower in the hierarchy such as the kolis and other dalit castes. Power relations are linked to social and economic hierarchy and the issue of resource inequity must be tackled through policy and advocacy measures.*

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For more than a decade Gujarat has been at the forefront of debates concerning water scarcity and declining groundwater table. Water for drinking and irrigation is of critical concern in the state today, particularly in areas where groundwater recharge is low and rainfall is scanty and erratic. Consecutive droughts between 1999 and 2001 have aggravated the problem.<sup>1</sup> Vadali in Chotila taluka of Surendranagar district is one of the numerous drought-stricken villages in the state. It is 35 km south of Chotila town and inhabited by 354 families. According to the 2001 Census, the village has a population of 1,517. It is dominated by ahirs (around 120 families) followed by kolis (100 families) while the rest are from dalit, suthar, bawa and bharwad castes. Ahirs are a landed class that own around

90 per cent of the total irrigated land in the village.

The villagers depend on the groundwater for both irrigation and drinking water; there are around 125 open wells for irrigation. The area is characterised by hard rock and therefore not suited to deep tubewells. The depth of open wells ranges from 12 to 24 m. The drinking water needs are met through deep wells that have been dug in the centre of the village. Water is accessed through pumps and is collected in overhead tanks from where it is distributed through standposts to different social groups.

In the last four or five years, the village has been facing a scarcity of drinking water. The present drinking water well dries up in early March and is recharged only during monsoon, i.e. late June or early July.<sup>2</sup> During the time when water is not available in the wells, the village is

supplied water through tankers by the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board (GWSSB). However, tanker supply is resumed only between late April and early May. For the other months, the villagers manage to meet their drinking water needs from farm wells. In the year 2003-04, only 20-30 per cent of the total farm wells had water that was available for around 30 minutes to one hour a day.

In order to ensure drinking water security, GWSSB constructed two check dams on the two small rivulets that flow through the village. However, these measures were not sufficient and provided little relief for the villagers. The village was covered under the community-managed development of water supply and sanitation programme of Water and Sanitation Management Organisation (WASMO)<sup>3</sup> with active support from Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, India (AKRSP (I)). They collaborated with the village to draw up a village action plan to manage drinking water and sanitation activities. One of the components of the plan was to de-silt the check dams built by GWSSB; these are close to the tubewells and helped recharge the aquifer. The plan was to dig a drinking water well near the dam and supply water to the village through a pipeline.

According to plan, the check dam was de-silted in early 2004. The subsequent monsoon filled the check dam and recharged 12 farm wells in the vicinity. The villagers said that the water actually overflowed from the wells, something that they had not seen in the last five years. Looking at the water availability, the farmers around the dam sowed winter crops such as cotton

and groundnut and were able to reap benefits. However, in late 2004 while monitoring the progress of the pani samiti by the Coordination Monitoring and Support Unit (CMSU) of WASMO, Surendranagar and AKRSP (I), the topic of constructing a drinking water well in the vicinity of the check dam came up; it reflected the village action plan. However, having seen the bountiful harvest that the check dams had enabled, the farmers in the area opposed the drinking water well. They feared that their farm wells would have to share the aquifer and that they would get less water for irrigation. These farmers belong to the dominant ahir caste that has a stronghold over the functioning of the panchayat and pani samiti (see the table).

### Caste Conflict

A pertinent question is, why this opposition if the drinking water is meant for everybody in the village. Does drinking water scarcity not affect them all in a similar way? The answer lies in understanding the social structure of the village. As mentioned before, ahirs dominate the village both economically and socially. They are mostly landed households who own a significant number of farm wells. When the water in the community well (which is the source of drinking water) dries up, landed ahirs do not face any problem. Around 20-30 farm wells continue to hold some water; while it is not sufficient for irrigation, it is enough to meet their drinking water needs. During the scarcity period, these families stay on the farm so that they have enough water

for themselves and for their livestock; those families who stay back in the village cart water from the field. The water problem affects those who do not have land or farm wells – kolis and dalits. In the bad months the women from these families have to depend on the upper caste for drinking water. Manjuben says, “During summer we face acute problem of drinking water. The ahirs have their own farm wells and they either carry water from those wells or stay there during scarcity months so they do not face the problem. We do not have wells and so have to depend on those who have.”

The dependency makes lower caste women vulnerable and prone to harassment. As one of the dalit women puts it, “We cannot afford to disobey upper caste families as we are dependent on them for employment on their farms and other needs including drinking water when our village well run dry. The GWSSB’s tanker supply is uncertain and unreliable.”

The ahirs on the other hand also benefit from the tanker programme of GWSSB. As soon as the village is declared scarcity affected, the GWSSB is obliged to make drinking water available through tankers. The supply of water is done through contractors who fetch water from the ahir farm wells and distribute it in the nearby villages. Most contractors are from the richer classes and benefit from the job. This makes them less interested in drinking water projects that aim to resolve water scarcity since they directly gain from the scarcity situation – both economically and socially.

The village dynamics forced AKRSP (I) and WASMO to seek an alternative. A number of meetings were held with various stakeholders – farmers, pani samiti and panchayat members and women from various social groups. The farmers in the vicinity of the newly de-silted check dam refused to cooperate and threatened dire consequences if the well were dug at that site. Dalits and kolis voiced their opinion in secret but never raised any issues in public meetings out of fear for their jobs. It was clear that a compromise formula that was socially and technically feasible needed to be worked out. An alternative site was selected by the pani samiti that is close to the present drinking water well in the village. Both AKRSP (I) and WASMO are involved in the project; they have understood that conflict can lead to cancellation/change of plans.<sup>4</sup> De-silting another check dam on the rivulet might help recharge the new location. A field visit in March 2005,

**Table: Stakeholder Analysis Matrix**

Stakeholder	Impact of Drinking Water Scarcity	Motivation to Participate in Addressing Problem of Scarcity	Relationship with Other Stakeholders
Pani samiti/panchayat	Some members who are from resource poor groups are affected but a majority are rich farmers who are not directly affected	As a representative group, they are motivated to address the problem	Partnership with some, in conflict with others as they try to force decisions that favour their interests.
Rich farmers/well owners	Not directly affected	Not motivated to address drinking water problems because they benefit from tanker water supply programme of government	In conflict with landless and dalit, in partnership with panchayat, pani samiti AKRSP(I) and WASMO
Landless/near landless/dalit/dalit women	Directly affected/dependent on well owners for drinking water during times of scarcity	Motivation is high because they suffer most	In covert conflict with rich farmers, in partnership with panchayat, pani samiti, AKRSP(I) and WASMO
AKRSP(I)	Not affected directly	Motivation is high since they are agents of change.	In partnership with all stakeholders
WASMO	Not affected directly	Motivation is high since they are agents of change	In partnership with all stakeholders

assured us that the new well is indeed being constructed and is expected to be 24 m deep.

The selection of a new construction site for the drinking water well minimised the conflict but also revealed the internal dynamics of the community. It highlighted the fact that power structure and social and economic hierarchy go hand in hand and unless the issue of resource inequity is tackled through policy and advocacy means, the real issue will not be solved. Community based programmes under innovative institutions such as WASMO can help speed up the service delivery systems and minimise corruption which was prevalent earlier but bringing about social change within 18 months of a project cycle is too much to expect. [17]

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## Notes

- 1 During 1999-2000, the government declared 8,666 villages (from a total of 18,637 villages) scarcity-hit in the wake of monsoon failure. Total scarcity was declared in 6,675 villages while 1991 villages had semi-scarcity conditions and 7,467 villages faced severe shortage of drinking water. According to the government, the deficient monsoon resulted in 29 to 31 per cent decline in crop production in Saurashtra, Kutch and North Gujarat districts. The estimated figures of production showed a fall of 45 per cent in pearl millet, 83 per cent in sorghum, 72 per cent in groundnut and 41 per cent in 'moong'. The total crop loss was estimated at Rs 4.59 crore (GoG 2000). The problem continued in 2002 when 13 out of 25 districts received less than normal rainfall. In total, 5,144 villages in these districts were declared scarcity/semi-scarcity hit. The production loss for the kharif season was estimated to be 23 per cent amounting to Rs 1.87 crore while in the rabi season, the loss was of the order of Rs 96.9 lakh [GoG 2004].
- 2 Gujarat has only one rainfall period between June-July and September-October that ranges between 1,000 and 2,000 mm in the southern rocky highland and between 250 and 400 mm in Kutch. The distribution of rainfall determines the water regime in the state. Around 70 per cent of Gujarat's total geographic area falls in the arid or semi-arid zone and is drought-prone [Patel 1997].
- 3 WASMO is an autonomous organisation created by the Government of Gujarat to promote, facilitate and empower village panchayats and rural communities to manage local water resources and have their own water supply system and environmental sanitation facilities. It empowers the village community through pani samitis and they plan, approve, implement, operate and maintain their own water supply systems, manage water resources and ensure safe and reliable drinking water supply throughout the year. WASMO works with NGOs and pani samitis by providing financial and technical support ([www.wasmo.org](http://www.wasmo.org)).

- 4 This is a difficult situation for outsiders trying to bring about change. The nature of both the external implementing agencies is based on consensus building and partnership. The project cycle is around 18 months and as one of the officials puts it, one cannot expect social change to come about in such a short period of time and within the framework of partnership. This is in the context of the feudal structure of the village in question and the relationship that the poor have with rich ahir farmers. Without having an alternative, dalits cannot afford to be at loggerheads with the upper caste farmers who are part of their social and economic security

system. A koli labourer puts it succinctly: "When we need money we go to ahir farmers, when we need work we go to them, how do you expect us to disobey them?"

## Reference

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- Patel, P P (1997): *Ecoregions of Gujarat*, Gujarat Ecology Commission, Vadodara.