

Update on work taken up under the Asha for Education fellowship in 2014-15

One of the key goals of this year's work was to expand the work on water conservation through building ponds, based on the learnings and results from the work done on 5 ponds in 1 village in 2012-13. The other key goal was to raise funds through other sources for work on ponds, primarily through the Panchayats and Sambhaav with the goal that the work sustains itself beyond work / programme support from Asha.

Expansion of work

The primary method to expand the work was to collaborate with the Vagad Mazdoor Kisan Sangathan, which is a local community network of Bhil Adivasi farmers and labourers. The Sangathan has been a partner in my work in the area since the time I initiated work in Dungarpur in 2008.

As part of the process of expansion, I held discussions with the Sangathan's team and community member representatives at various forums at the district level. Through this process, we shortlisted a list of 9 more villages all of whom are inhabited fully by Bhil Adivasi farmers, where the work could possibly be taken up, apart from Manat Phala in Chundawada village, where the work is already being done:

1. Mandwa, Dungarpur block
2. Sarkan Kopcha, Dungarpur block
3. Mahudi, Bicchiwara block
4. Malmatha, Bicchiwara block
5. Manipur, Bicchiwara block
6. Kanpur, Bicchiwara block
7. Kodyagun, Bicchiwara block
8. Valota, Dungarpur block
9. Asoda Phala, Chundawada, Bicchiwada block

Within the district, Dungarpur and Bicchiwada blocks are more challenging to work in, due to their hilly terrain as compared to the other blocks which are less hilly. These are also the two blocks where the Sangathan's membership and leadership base is the strongest.

I held discussions with farmers at the village-level in these 9 villages, after which I continued follow up work in 2 villages – Kodyagun and Valota through village-level visits and meetings, based on the interest level of farmers and the potential and need to take up such work in the village.

Apart from the need for water on the ground in that village for drinking, livestock or irrigation, there are two main factors which determined the interest of farmers in taking up work on water:

The first is the availability of private land / farms over which a pond can be built, which means the farmer who owns that piece of land has to be willing to give up growing crops on that piece of land atleast for one (if water in the pond dries up by the start of winter that year) or two (if water in the pond does not dry up by the start of winter that year) seasons. For instance, farmers of Mahudi were not keen to give up their agricultural land.

The second is their willingness to contribute part of the cost (ranging from 30-50% of the cost) primarily through labour. This is a challenge because most work done by the Government and other NGOs is usually based on no or nominal contribution from the participating farmers and so it takes time to motivate and encourage farmers to pitch in. For instance, farmers of Sarkan Kopcha were not keen to work on a contribution basis.

Kanpur was a village which I felt was sufficiently endowed with water already, as it was downstream of a large dam (Mewara Bandh) and so had water from both canals and wells (recharged by the dam).

So in all, there was need and scope to take up work in 6 new villages. I decided to restrict and continue follow up work in 2 new villages only – Kodyagun and Valota, based on the maximum interest and potential to do such work and the work expenses / programme budget available through the Asha fellowship (@Rs 20000-40000/- per pond * 3 ponds = ~Rs 90000/-). This would make it 3 villages in all, including Manat Phala in Chundawada, where the work was already being done.

After multiple rounds of discussions in the 2 new villages (Kodyagun and Valota) and 1 old village (Chundawada), farmers identified possible locations to build a pond that would help recharge wells downstream of the pond and improve availability of water for irrigation and drinking (for livestock and humans). The exact location of the 3 proposed ponds is shown in this map:

https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zPoDw_fVL1H0.k-SVUSDomOIs.

After the Fellowship was approved in November 2014, it took me a few months to prepare and go through the process of discussion within the Sangathan and the villages about expansion of the work. No work can be done during the monsoons and until the Kharif crop season was over (June – October) as the farmers are busy with agricultural work.

Discussions with farmers of Bharatpur, Valota is nearly complete and I expect the construction of the pond in Valota to begin in the last week of October 2015 and take about a month to be completed by November 2015.

Construction of the pond in Kodyagun can be taken up only after the Rabi crop season is completed, as farmers are interested in a clayey soil barrier within its bund to improve the surface water holding capacity of the pond and to enhance its utility. Clayey soil is however available only downstream of the pond location. There is no road in the village that can reach the pond site apart from through its fields, and since farmers have a rabi crop (wheat, chickpea and mustard) sown right now, the pond construction may have to wait till the rabi season is over (February - March 2016). Discussions are still on in the village regarding this matter, and if an alternative site is chosen or if the pond is built without a clay barrier, it may be completed before February 2016.

The other issue in Kodyagun that has come up is that the land over which the pond site that has been chosen presently lies in the ownership of the Forest Department, who may not allow any construction to take place. This will be clear through discussions between the villagers and the Forest Department over the next 1-2 months. Villagers have identified 2 other pond sites in the event the Forest Department disallows construction.

This issue of building or building on Forest Department is likely to be a persistent issue in this region, as there is very limited common land (land that is not private but belongs to the community / Panchayat) and where most Adivasi Bhil farmers live and work on the fringes / borders of land belonging to the Forest Department.

Both these 2 new ponds will benefit about 40-50 families in each village by recharging their wells and borewells.

Discussions regarding the construction of the 6th pond in Manat Phala, Chundawada are on. The 5 ponds that were built earlier in 2012-13 have survived and successfully stored, harvest and recharged rainwater from 3 monsoons (2013, 2014 and 2015), and benefited atleast 30 families by recharging their wells and borewells each year.

For the new (6th) pond in Manat Phala, I am trying to increase the contribution of the farmers from 35-40% to 50%. The bunds of 2 of the 5 old ponds are in need of some repair. I am trying to get them to contribute 100% of cost of the repair work the two old ponds need, which farmers have in principle agreed to do. I expect the work on the new pond and the repair work on the old ponds to be completed by January 2016.

Overall, I will need time of 6 more months till about Apr 2016 to complete the physical work on 3 ponds. I don't need any additional fellowship or work / programme funds to complete this work during this period as the work has already been supported for by Asha. There is a balance of about Rs. 83,875/- which I will use to cover part of the cost of the ponds (with the other part contributed by the farmers) and any short fall I will seek from Sambhaav.

Raising support for the work from other sources

Sambhaav has agreed to reimburse the personal funds (Rs 1.7 lakhs) I spent towards part of the construction cost of the 5 ponds built in 2012-13 in Manat Phala, Chundawada as and when they have new programme funds available in 2015-16 or later.

The plan of the work for the next 3-5 years in Dungarpur covering 5-10 villages is also now formally part of Sambhaav's overall work plan and budget for 2015-18, along with 5-10 villages of Udaipur district, which together would comprise the Southern Rajasthan segment of Sambhaav's work. This will complement and expand Sambhaav's existing work in Western and Eastern Rajasthan segments. Hence at the very least, some work / programme support for continuing the on the ground work in Dungarpur, if not the fellowship stipend will be available through Sambhaav, even if the next phase of my fellowship is not renewed / supported by Asha.

The second mode of raising support for the work was through the Panchayats, in particular the MGNREGA programme. With some support, farmers of Bharatpur, Valota successfully followed up with their Sarpanch by submitting applications repeatedly and through multiple follow up meetings, to take up the construction of atleast 1 pond (at Toran Ghati, Bharatpur, Valota) through NREGA / Panchayat funds. The Sarpanch has approved the work and has included it in the Panchayat's action plan for 2015-16. The farmers expect the work on this pond to be completed before the next monsoons (June 2016). It did help that the Sarpanch was a member and well-wisher of the Sangathan.

Discussions are also on with the Sarpanch of Mandwa village, who is also on good terms with the Sangathan, to include work on ponds in the Panchayat's yearly action plan, though the results have not reached the stage as it has in Bharatpur, Valota. More follow up on this will be done by the farmers of Mandwa, in the next 6 months before the monsoons (June 2016).

Building on the above two examples, in the next phase of work (3-5 years) wherever the Sangathan has a good relationship with the local Panchayats in the region, it should be possible to get the Panchayats to invest in ponds through MGNREGA and other Government programmes.

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Dungarpur, Rajasthan
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