

Salt of Life – Visit to Jaisalmer - 11th to 16th January 2010

As part of the learning process of taking up work on water and land in Dungarpur district, I participated in “Salt of Life”, a 6-day annual event organised by Sambhaav, this year in Jaisalmer.

Some learnings and observations from the trip are:

- The visit helped me understand the process (to some extent) through which the work on water was being taken up by Sambhaav with the local people, over the last 4 years.
- The key feature of the process, as I understood it, is to replicate what and how the local people would have themselves done the work, if left alone (like the times before State-led interventions). The focus is on patience - not in any way preempting the process to force 'desired' results, and two, on building relationships with the people involved.
- This process does not involve any 'giving/doling', where one gives the money and the other is supposed to do the work, like in regular Government programs. This prevents dependency and builds ownership of the local people. While the process may appear to be slow, its results are long-term, and when people take up work on their own, the pace picks up later on.
- I learnt some technical details of various traditional water harvesting / agriculture systems of the desert - talaab, beri, tanda, khadin and kuan. The design of the structures and of the system around it, are completely localised depending on the physical and social situation from place to place.
- A high point of the visit, was that I got to live with, interact and learn from other participant team members in the trip. In particular, I got a lot of time with Chattar Singh (Sambhaav team member working in Jaisalmer) who has a deep sense of the desert way of living and of water, and got to discuss in depth, the social, technical and other details of how the work is being done.
- It is most striking that communities in this region can live happily and with reasonable bounty, even with the very low rainfall (<150mm) they get. This is because they have responded to the circumstances, with a carefully designed system, to harvest all the little rain they get, and also build a strong support system around it – be it livestock, pasture lands and so on. Surely then, it is possible to achieve the same results or more in Dungarpur, considering that this region gets about 5 times the rainfall.
- I got to see the complete failure of the much-touted IGNP from close quarters. The traditional response of development organisations to this, is to 'organise' people and 'fight' the local and higher authorities, from the experiences of Chattar, I realised it will be of no avail.
- The only response to entrenched corruption in the Government system, is to initiate the process of rebuilding the local people's confidence in their own abilities to work (whether on water or other things), demonstrate results locally and connect with people who have taken up similar efforts locally. This will set in the natural process of questioning the local authorities on what they should be doing, on the back on on-the-ground work that has been done and is more effective.

- The breathtaking views of Biprasar talaab, the vast wheat fields in Derasar khadin and vast number of animals who come to the Isawal kuan to drink, in the middle of vast sandy terrain, can only be seen to be appreciated.
- Even though, the vast desert terrain appears sandy and barren, it is teeming with both plant and animal life. Only, it requires us to have trained eyes to observe.
- Knowing and seeing a third kind of water, apart from the normally understood surface water (palar) and ground water (patali), called rejani (a sort of sub-surface water) by the local people, was an important learning. In Jaisalmer area, rejani pani is expressed in beris, while patali is expressed in kuans, while I would have confused beris and kuans to be from the same source. For a region like Dungarpur, rejani would be expressed through its open-wells, while patali would be expressed in bore-wells, though I need to delve into more details about this.
- Water in the beris, is clear, sweet and refreshing to drink.
