



## Mandwa Village: The Metamorphosis of Life After Water Seeped Into its Soil...

**W**ith the agrarian crisis spreading its deadly grip over regions earlier considered well endowed, is a self-reliant village economy a tangible dream? Is it anywhere close to an attainable goal in an era where sectoral development approaches are the norm? While attempts are afoot to find responses on different fronts, a solution that is basic, sure and sustainable is to conserve and enrich the natural resource base on which the village community depends for its sustenance and livelihood. Going along with nature by protecting and developing watersheds is one of the tried and tested methods of being ensured of receiving from mother earth ceaselessly from one generation to the next. And when this is managed by a zealous and persistent community it provides a continuous spin to a virtuous and veritable cycle of sustainable living. Such a model addresses the twin objectives of resource conservation and rural development. With several empirical evidences of success to its credit, 'participatory watershed development' is emerging as a radical model for sustainable development that scores many points over other suggested methods.

Mandwa located in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra effectively showcases how developing the resource base through participatory watershed development can result in overall sustainable development. It is a small village of 80 households in the Hingna taluka of Nagpur district, with a mixed community having a predominantly tribal population. All villages of this area generally being small are organized into the Gat Gram Panchayats (Group Village Panchayats), which implies

clubbing together of 3 or 4 villages. Mandwa is a member of such a Gat Gram Panchayat that consists of three other villages.

### The Onset of Transition

Mandwa today is a clean & beautiful village with productive fields where happy and cheerful faces have replaced the distressed ones of yore. Not long ago, the scenario was completely different. Season upon season of failed rains had rendered the land unproductive and the villagers unemployed. Even during the good rainfall years, owing to the lack of irrigation facilities, agriculture was generally mere subsistent in nature. The half-year's employment that was available in the village was far from sufficient to take care of the basic needs of the villagers and the condition was even more severe during the low rainfall years. This obviously churned out acute poverty and low standards of living for the inhabitants, thereby making seasonal migration inevitable.

At such a point of time, CRTDP (Comprehensive Rural and Tribal Development Project), an NGO working to provide health and education support to the villagers, felt the need for some sustainable action that would ensure a decent livelihood for the villagers. While CRTDP trains villagers in vocational skills like sewing, embroidery and other such activities, it realized that holistic development of a village would neither be complete nor sustainable in the absence of an assured income from



agriculture, the primary economic activity of the village. With this objective in mind, Mr. Karim David, Director, CRTDP approached WOTR way back in 1993 to explore the possibilities of developing the watershed around the village. This started off a series of joint efforts wherein Mr. Karim David from CRTDP and Crispino Lobo of WOTR made several visits to the village to convince the villagers about the benefits of developing their watershed.

## The Herculean Task Called “Rapport Building”

It certainly wasn't easy. The first few meetings went futile as the villagers were skeptical and doubted the intentions of the organizations. It is quite a daunting task to win the trust of a rural tribal community, where social norms and cultural values play a major role in all their mundane activities. Religion was also a deterrent as they were a Hindu community and they feared that forceful conversion would be the result if the missionaries were to start any kind of work in their village. The villagers feared that their lands would be taken away from them. Besides at that time, little was known about the concept of watershed development. When it was introduced at their Gram Sabha meetings, they either failed to understand or refused to believe that such a concept existed or that it can bring about any kind of a change in their impoverished lives.



Perseverance however paid off. Slowly CRTDP and WOTR managed to work their way through the hearts of the people and convinced them to visit other villages where watershed work had actually been undertaken. Thus, a group of 50 villagers went on an exposure visit to Ahmednagar district, where they engaged themselves in meaningful and eye-opening dialogues with farmers and witnessed the transition that had taken place. Such a dramatic change through the watershed development interventions had not been anticipated! Besides, the fears of their lands being taken away from them and fears of conversions were laid to rest. This was indeed 'the' turning point and the people zealously resolved to prove the credibility of watershed development in their own village. It was the breakthrough that WOTR needed! The villagers still cherish the memories of their 16 hours journey; their first step out of their district to the village of Mendwan that morphed their lives forever in a way they never could even fathom!

## One Step at a Time

The proverbial positivity of taking things one step at a time was proved yet again.

**1. Shramdaan:** Measured 'shramdaan' (local contribution) is a non-negotiable in a watershed development (WSD) project. It took the villagers time to get accustomed to the idea of 'shramdaan', which was both new and incomprehensible to them. Slowly, as they began to grasp the concept, the two ways of 'shramdaan' were introduced. The first was that of providing on-site labor of one person-day a week at the watershed site. The bigger farmers however preferred the second method of contribution, whereby they sent one paid daily wage farm worker to the watershed site or paid one day's wages to compensate for his own absence.



**2. Imposition of Crucial Disciplines:** Kurhadbandi (ban on cutting of trees but lopping permitted) and Charaibandi (ban on open grazing on treated area) are the two essentials for making WSD succeed, at least, largely during the implementation phase. The villagers, who were accustomed to cutting trees for fuel-wood found it difficult to abide by the Kurhadbandi rule. Charaibandi was also an alien concept. The 'cut and carry' method was incomprehensible & seemed an unnecessary waste of time. Cattle must be left free to graze is their opinion. After much effort and time on the part of the implementing agencies, compliance to the rule was brought about, even though the villagers were still not fully convinced of their positive effects.

**3. Phases of Implementation:** The Capacity Building Phase (CBP) started in February 1995 and ended in 1997. A total of Rs. 3,50,000 was utilized in this phase. The focus, as the name suggests, was on mobilizing the community and giving them 'hands-on' experience of running a 'micro within micro' watershed. Gram Sabhas were conducted to disseminate information and to elicit the willingness of the villagers to implement the programme. The visual impact of video shows was to help them to better understand the project, to allay their fears and respond to queries. They finally demonstrated their willingness to adopt the programme by contributing four days of 'shramdaan', after which a 'Letter of Agreement' was signed.

Exposure visits and various trainings were arranged for the members of VWC (Village Watershed Committee), SMS (Samyukt Mahila Samiti), as well as SHGs (Self Help Group). Land based treatment like CCT (continuous contour trenches), farm bunds, WAT (water absorption trenches), contour bunds, stone outlets and Drainage Line Treatments were undertaken during the CBP. WOTR had begun using its innovative Participatory Net Planning tool, where households (both husbands and wives) are required to participate in planning their land treatments and their opinions and suggestions were duly considered.

15,713 saplings that were planted stands testimony to the shramdaan contributed by the villagers. Rs. 7,00,000 were given for the disposition fund. This is the fund used for maintaining the link between the Capacity Building Phase (CBP) and the Full Implementation Phase (FIP), so that the work is not interrupted due to a gap between the two in terms of lack of funds. The FIP was started in January 1998. This phase took exactly three years and the project came to an end in January 2001.



## How “Weaving a Structured Compliance” Paid Off

The Mandwa Panlot Kshetra Vikas Samiti or The Village Watershed Committee (VWC) was formally registered on November 1, 1999. It consists of 9 executive members, out of whom 5 are men and 4 women. Mr. Gajanan Fagoji Choudhari is presently the Chairman of the Mandwa VWC.

All activities of the VWC are conducted from the office of the VWC, which has been provided for the purpose by the implementing agency. Meetings are held once a month subject to the date specified by the Gram Panchayat.

It is remarkable that even after six years of the completion of the project, the VWC is active and takes up watershed management activities on its own initiative. Maintenance of the watershed treatment structures is done regularly and without fail. These activities are carried out using the maintenance fund provided

for the purpose. At present the balance with the VWC is Rs. 1,58,000 which are the savings of the VWC from the maintenance fund.

The VWC has appointed Mr. Vinayak Hatelwar as the voluntary Panlot Sevak (watershed helper), to look after all post-watershed activities, for a monthly remuneration of a thousand Rupees. He is responsible for the collaboration and communication within the village, circulating the watershed notice, and maintaining & supervising the domestic water supply scheme of the Samyukta Mahila Samiti (SMS) in the village.

## Moving On...

The watershed project of Mandwa can be cited as a landmark success in the Vidarbha region. Several unparalleled positive changes mark the social as well as economic parameters of the lives of the villagers. It is indeed amazing to see the many ways in which watershed development has affected them. The first startling observation made by the villagers themselves is that now the village has 70 Television sets and 20 motorbikes! They share this fact with mirth as well as a sense of pride. No doubt these are items of very mundane consumption in urban and semi-urban households. But for Mandwa, which has walked a long way from hunger and poverty to owning television sets, surely there has had to be a strong moving force behind it. This however is only one indicator of how watershed has brought prosperity to the village. At the base of this prosperity is the substantial increase in groundwater level, which has made agriculture a profitable 12 months long occupation. The wells that yielded water at 20 feet depth earlier do so now at 6-7 feet. There is no dearth of work in the village at any point of time during the whole year as agriculture has achieved a major turnaround.

There have been several hues of colours that have been added in their otherwise nondescript lives.

## Changes in Land Use and Cropping Patterns

Watershed has brought about the most extraordinary change in the land use pattern in the village. Prior to watershed intervention in the year 1997, the land under perennial cultivation was just 15 hectares. It has jumped to 200 hectares in as of early 2007. Vegetables were grown only over 4 hectares of land earlier, but it is now spread over 60 hectares. The value of crop yields shot up from Rs. 20,000 per acre in 1997 to Rs. 1.25 lakhs today.

The main Kharif crops grown in the watershed include kapus (cotton), tur (pigeon pea), jowar (pearl millet), soyabean and red grams. While earlier only Kharif (monsoon) crops were cultivated, now the villagers grow a Rabi (winter) crop too, where besides

those mentioned above, vegetables as well as wheat are also grown. Summer season is characterized by horticulture production. These are the hallmarks of the watershed programme underlined by the earnest efforts of the community and the supporting agencies.

The increased land fertility is reflected in the land prices, which have soared from Rs. 10,000 per acre to Rs. 6,00,000 per acre for irrigated land. Surely, the effects of a booming land trade market has petered into distant Mandwa as well! Prices of rainfed land have also witnessed a similar rise where prices have gone up from Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 4,00,000 per acre. (Table 1,2)

## Occupational Structure

Earlier, the occupational structure was such that the villagers were engaged in agriculture and agricultural labour for the Kharif season, which lasted for about 5 months. Summer season again provided employment in the form of collection of Tendu leaves (used for rolling Bidis) from the nearby forest. These leaves would be tied into bundles of a hundred each and then sold to the contactor. This activity would last for about 2 months and provide the villagers with some income of about Rs. 40-50 per person day.

**Table 1:** The Impacts of Watershed at a Glance

Sr. No.	Indicators	Pre-Watershed Prior to 1997	Post Watershed 2000	In the year 2007
1.	Households (No.)	62	65	80
2.	Population (No.)	320	243	425
3.	Cultivated area (ha.)	315	315	315
	a) Perennial	15	40	200
	b) Seasonal	300	260	100
	c) Vegetable cultivation	04	40	60
4.	Wells in the village (No.)	3	20	33
5.	Depth of the well (feet below ground level)	20	8 -10	6 -7
6.	Agriculture Employment (Months / annum)	4	9	12
7.	Production – crop yield (Rs/acre)	20,000	75,000	125,000
8.	Fodder production (for local livestock / annum)	8	12	Surplus
9.	Land Value (Rs./Acre)			
	a) Agriculture	10,000	40,000	6,00,000
	b) Waste land (Rainfed)	2,000	10,000	4,00,000
10.	Livestock (No.)			
	i. Bullock	110	170	170
	ii. Cow (scrub)	163	120	120
	iii. Cow (Crossbred)	00	40	60
	iv. Sheep and Goats	400	200	100
	v. Buffaloes	11	19	5
11.	Dairy Milk (Liters/day)	20. lit./day (Only for domestic use)	250 to 270	200 (approx.)
12.	Kitchen garden (No.)	All the families	All the families	All the families
13.	Bio-gas (No.)	4	4	4
14.	Cylinder gas (No.)	Nil	8	8
15.	Smokeless chullas (No.)	5	15	15
16.	Individual latrines (No.)	1	3	80
17.	Soak pits (No.)	Nil	0	80
18.	Electric Motor (No.)	2	20	33
	Oil Engine	2	Nil	Nil
19.	Tractors (No.)	1	Nil	Nil
20.	Television (No.)	1	15	70
21.	Cycle (No.)	60	40	25
22.	Motorcycle (No.)	Nil	2	20
23.	Small shops (No.)	Nil	1	2
24.	SHGs (No.)	Nil	2	9
25.	Members in SHGs (No.)	Nil	39	102
26.	No of CBOs (Community Based Organisation) (No.)	4	8	13
27.	Daily wages (Rs / day)	Men: Rs. 30 Women: Rs. 15	Men: Rs. 50 -80 Women: Rs. 30 - 60	Men: Rs.80 - 100 Women: Rs. 40 - 55
28.	Savings (if done)	Nil	Monthly savings	Monthly savings
29.	Literacy rate (of population)	33%	86%	86%

Table 2: Changes in the Cropping Pattern and Production

Types of Crops, Area Sown and Productivity	Pre-Watershed Prior to 1997	Post Watershed 2000	In the year 2007
<b>Kharif Crops</b>			
Cotton - area covered	186.24 ha.	218 ha.	204.24 ha.
Production per ha.	7 quintals	9 quintals	11.25 quintals
Sorghum - area covered	78.23 ha.	61 ha.	40 ha
Production per ha.	17.45 quintals	21.50 quintals per ha.	24 quintals
Soyabean - area covered	34.43 ha.	78.15 ha.	83.35 ha.
Production per ha.	15 quintals	21 quintals	25 quintals
Vegetable - area covered	16.48 ha.	26.25 ha.	44.55 ha.
Production per ha.	50 quintals	60 quintal per ha.	70 quintal per ha.
<b>Winter Crops</b>			
Wheat - area covered	Nil	48 ha.	50.01 ha.
Production per ha.	Nil	13 quintals	15 quintals
Red gram - area covered	8.50 ha.	17 ha.	20 ha.
Production per ha.	6.50 quintals	9.60 quintals	11 quintals
Orange - area covered	16.75 ha.	13.26 ha.	6.70 ha.
Production per ha.	150 quintals	175 quintals	175 quintals
Vegetables grown in Summer	Nil	Nil	33.34 ha.
Production per ha.	Nil	Nil	60 quintals

The watershed work has brought about an unprecedented change in the occupational structure of the village. There is a resounding increase in agricultural employment and there is now very little dependence on Tendu leaf collection. Earlier, the entire village was engaged in this occupation. Now this has reduced to barely 30-40 people. To work as farm labour has also become more remunerative as the wage rate has increased. Mr. Bhakraji Sahare, a landless labourer, expresses his revelry in the resplendence of the village. From the wages that he and his wife earn, they are able to send their four children to school and thus dream of a prosperous future.

## Livestock and Livestock Produce

While livestock wasn't essentially the primary source of income for the villagers, they did rear a large number of cattle and goats. The main purpose of rearing cattle was to produce farm animals. However, some milk was yielded from these cows, which was used for home consumption. While the number of cattle has diminished since watershed work started, milk production has seen a ten fold increase from 20 liters per day to 200 liters per day. (Table 1) There are two attributes behind this increase, namely, ample availability of water and fodder. While fodder was available only for 8 months earlier, now there is a surplus available within the village.

## The Master Stroke: Community Organisation

Watershed development has not only brought about economic affluence, but has also enriched the village in many ways. Community organization is the key. Such instances of social harmony are presented below.

**1. Women's Self Help Groups:** Since the inception of the watershed programme in the village, 8 Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been formed. There were none earlier. The first SHG was formed on March 1, 1996, closely at the heels of the initiation of the watershed project. It consisted of 23 members who agreed to save Rs. 20 per month with the SHG. The second one was formed in 1998, consisting of 16 members. Six more SHGs were formed in the year 2006. Today a total of 102 women of the village are currently members of the SHGs. The total money pool of all the SHGs together today stands at Rs. 2,26,305.

Apart from the 8 SHGs, 7 women of the village were also enthused to come together to form the Samyukta Mahila Samiti (SMS) in 1999.



While SHGs were merely savings groups to begin with, these have now become empowered bodies that have a prominent say in the decision-making of the village. Another noteworthy feature is that the SMS, which works as an informal federation of all the SHGs, utilize Rs. 1,40,000 on construction of a water tank in the village as a part of the village drinking water activity. The SMS not only initiated and implemented the scheme but also manages it. A monthly water tax (Pani Patti) of Rs. 25 has been fixed for households with a private tap connection; and those using water from public taps need to pay Rs. 13 per month.

**2. Samuhik Vivah (Community Marriages):** The VWC initiated this activity with a dual purpose. One was to reduce the burden on parents of marriage expenses of their wards and the other was to bring the community closer. The VWC arranges this activity in coordination with the Gram Panchayat. Marriage ceremonies are conducted with all the punctiliousness of tradition with support from some local sponsors. Clothes and ornaments for the bride and the bridegroom, pandals, feasts for the guests and utensils for cooking are all provided for. The first community wedding was held in 2004, where 3 couples tied the knot. The number has been increasing ever since and in 2006, seventeen weddings were held at one time.

Mr. Sadashiv Harnaji Dadamal, a successful farmer of the village expresses his feelings about the new found community bonding in the village very lucidly: "The most important outcome of the watershed project is that people got united. The whole village has come together to build roads which is something that was undreamt of before."

**3. Cleanliness Drive:** The "Sant Gadgebaba Gram Swachhata Abhiyan" (Village Cleanliness Campaign) has infused a tremendous sense of community spirit among the village Panchayats and village organizations in rural Maharashtra. The Abhiyan offers no funds for upfront activities, but offers prize money to villages that fare well under certain criteria laid down by the government. This new development strategy evolved through the dictum "people initiate, government supports". This has brought about overall lifestyle changes in the village.

There used to be 100 percent 'open defecation' in the village in the pre-watershed days. With the help of the then BDO (Block



Development Officer), Mr. Raju Gotmare, the village took on the challenge of converting itself into a completely open defecation free village. While the Block Development Office provided the village with material worth Rs. 1,50,000 for toilet construction, the Panchayat Samiti provided the toilet pots, pipes and technical support.

The village today has 80 private toilets and is hundred percent free of open defecation. Mandwa has recently been honoured with the "Nirmal Gram Puraskar", which comprises of Rs. 5,00,000, which is an award for cleanliness under the above stated 'abhiyan'. Gajanan Choudhary (the Vice Sarpanch) and the VWC President had received the award at the hands of the honorable President of India on May 4, 2007 in Delhi. PLS (Panlot Sevak Samiti) member Mr. Vinayak has assured that the entire prize money would be utilized for village development.



**4. Ban on Alcohol:** Alcoholism was one of the major social problems of the village as domestic violence was rampant under the influence of liquor. The women of Mandwa took up the cudgels against this very strongly. One of the women, Chhayabai Choudhari, narrated the incident when the women had caught a villager red-handed with a pot of liquor hidden in his house. The liquor was seized with the help of the police and thrown out of the house. There is hundred percent compliance of Darubandi (ban on alcohol) within the village now.

## Diligence Honoured

The undeterred efforts of the villagers have not gone unnoticed. The various awards that the village has received include:

1. Panlot Puraskar worth Rs. 15,000 and a memento at the state level.
2. Cash prize worth Rs. 5,000 in the best watershed project competition.
3. The feather in their cap, however, is the "Nirmal Gram Puraskar" the village has received from the President of India under the "Sant Gadgebaba Gram Swachhata Abhiyan" as mentioned above.

Another form of recognition gets reflected in the increasing number of visitors to the village every year. The pattern is interesting to look at.

- 54 institutions visited during the watershed work
- 60 institutions visited after the completion of the work

These comprised of local level institutions, and government as well as non-governmental institutions.

## Peoples' Perspectives

People of the village are able to articulate precisely the sweeping changes they have experienced in their lives owing to the watershed work. For instance, Bhakraji Sahare and his wife had to routinely migrate out of the village in search of work earlier, as in the village they could find only six months of employment. This had not only disturbed the stability of the family, but also disturbed the education of their children. Today the family leads a stable life with ample work available in the village. The children do not have to miss opportunities of a better life by foregoing education.

There is the instance of Mr. Sadashiv Dadmal, who is one of the better-off farmers of the village owning 40 acres of land. He says, "Though we have a large land holding, prior to watershed development more than half my land remained uncultivated for two seasons in a year. There was no water. Now as the water level has improved, I have dug 2 more wells and purchased 4 motor pumps. I now have 3 wells that provide ample water for my fields." Sadashiv grows cotton, sorghum, soyabean and all types of vegetables and pulses. He has 4 pairs of bullocks and 5 cross-bred cows. He also feels that prosperity has seeped into the lives of all the villagers. "Now there are employment opportunities available in the village all year round and people are earning money. What is most important however is that people have learnt to save the hard earned money through SHGs. This has made all the difference." This opinion highlights how women play an illuminating role in transforming lives, and are thus instrumental in transcendence from a low plateau to planes of higher elevations.

## The Acquisition of Wisdom and the Dawn of Empowerment

A successful initiative often has many failures intertwined in the fabric of experience. These failures however keep transforming themselves into lessons, upon which the transcendental success is based. It is therefore important to draw upon such experiences so as to help chart out similar activities.

It is relatively difficult to work in a tribal village as compared to a non-tribal village as they are cocooned in a world of their own. This in their perception is a haven, bound as they are by the

fetters of ignorance. The implementing agency has to display wilful perseverance, sincerity, grit and utmost patience when dealing with such villages, which finally shows up as beautiful embossments.

Demonstration projects have a huge and resounding impact. In Mandwa, the villagers were convinced about the potential and the impact of watershed projects only after they saw the watershed at Mendwan village in Ahmednagar district with their own eyes. It emboldened them to take on the challenge with the requisite thrust. It is therefore extremely important that model villages be created. Demonstrations of successful WSD villages takes the reluctant and passive villagers to the threshold of a new way of life.

Initially there was great reluctance on the part of the villagers for shramdaan. The agency had to adopt different means to win over the trust of the people and without any undue altercation. Very simple strategies were adopted. When asked to prioritize their needs, the villagers complained of many of them suffering from toothache. In response, a dentist was called for and the patients were given proper diagnosis and medication. Blankets, seeds and fertilizers were also provided to the villagers to win their trust and to convey to them that it was their welfare that was the priority.

Nonetheless, no organization however dedicated, can implement its plans without cooperation from the formal authorities. In Mandwa, the implementing agency worked its way through rapport building with the forest department to carry out its activities unhindered. Though this took quite a while, today the dividends are there for all to see.

The noble concept of measured Shramdaan is value-loaded, not merely because it provides the villagers with employment, but more crucially because it creates a sense of unity and a community ownership of the entire set of initiatives towards an inclusive positive change.

A team of dedicated social workers with excellent communications skills and an internalized understanding of the ways of rural life are required for successful implementation of such projects. Skilled technical persons are equally indispensable. High education qualifications are non-essential.

A key lesson that cannot be overlooked is that once the community is brought together and motivated for a cause, it is likely that this progressively surfaces various needs and hence possibilities. It is therefore important that external development interventions that address the most deeply and widely felt needs of the community come onto the stage so as to ensure maximum participation and maintain the energies generated.

Mandwa today is a confident village ready to take on any challenge with an undaunted spirit. What is most heartening is

the fact that success has not made the village complacent. The village is now focussing on construction of roads, which can rightly be envisaged as the next orbit that will mould their lives further. Mandwa is now in search of newer means for better ends. Watershed development with its accompanying feature of women's empowerment in the form of 'Self-Help' Groups thus spelt the prelude to a 'watershed' moment in their mundane and seemingly meaningless lives.

Mandwa's rags-to-riches story is not just "yet another oft-heard" tale of success. The spotlight is on the indomitable spirit of CRTDP and WOTR and the relentless strife of the villagers in achieving a landmark success. It is a practical fairy tale of the modern times, where wringing hands in despair is not the preferred agenda. Rather it is sheer grit and perseverance that pays off. The bright side of this tale is that it can be learnt from, replicated and relived.

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WOTR is a support/resource organisation working with 120 NGOs in the field of watershed development and related areas. Work is currently on in 308 micro-watersheds in partnership with other NGOs, spanning over an area of 3,60,557 ha. and benefitting a population of over 4,85,000. The experiences mentioned in *Watershed Voices* are those of WOTR and its partners implementing watershed development programs in the state of Maharashtra, India. This publication is financially supported by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ).

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