The Maharaja and the Waterman

Jal Bhagirathi Foundation (JBF) is the outcome of the persistent and committed efforts by Maharaja of Marwar, Gaj Singh and Paani Baba (the Water Man) Rajendra Singh. Despite the apparent diversity in their ways of life, this collaboration had a strong commonality to develop a persuasive alliance with the people of Marwar to make the region water secure.

When Rajendra Singh’s got Ramon Magsaysay Award for path-breaking work on community based traditional water systems and the Maharaja read all about him, he called for a meeting with him and the stage was set for initiating a similar movement in Marwar.

Organization and Alliances

A fragile ecosystem, extreme economic backwardness, a land which no longer yields fodder, fuel wood or food, disappearing groundwater resources and advancing desertification: this is Marwar. Every three years, the region suffers one lean year; every eight years, a year of famine. A land and environment that had tested the patience and versatility of humans through the ages, the region posed a stiff challenge to the House of Marwar and the Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) when they came together to form a strategic alliance for initiating a process of ecological, economic and social regeneration. It was a unique alliance, a partnership that had to draw from the strengths of both the parties to triumph over the hostile conditions.
The House of Marwar brought with it the support, following and faith of Marwar’s indomitable people. TBS offered its extensive knowledge and understanding — of social nuances, working with communities, technology, and of program and organizational management systems and processes. It also had the ability to link local issues to the wider national and international dialogue. Strong in its conviction to achieve its objectives, the alliance decided to initiate a movement in the desert.

To begin its work on institutionalizing decentralized governance of natural resources and overall development at the micro level, the alliance chose to depend on community leaders and local volunteers for support. A Jal Chetna Yatra (Public Awareness Campaign) was organized with their help from October 6-8, 2001, in Jodhpur, Jalore, Barmer and Pali districts. The purpose was to encourage the rural community to create village-level institutions for identifying and nurturing water sources, and to advocate village-centric reforms.

The Yatra was a success: village communities came forward to build water-harvesting structures in Bhadrajun (Jalore), Kolar, Guda and Chokaria (Pali). The encouraging response meant the initiative could be replicated in other parts of the region. Another thing that emerged from this Yatra was the idea of institutionalizing the partnership for enhanced output. The alliance received a name: Jal Bhagirathi.

Generating mass support was just one part of a multifaceted approach adopted by this initiative. As a strategic endeavor, a formal interaction with donor agencies was organized on November 24-25, 2001 at Pushkar in Ajmer district of Rajasthan. The purpose of the meeting was to share the plans and inspirations of the alliance with the agencies and get their cooperation and support. The delegates endorsed the efforts and suggested that the venture should acquire a formal status.

The alliance now moved ahead towards such a formal status. To get a general consensus on the formation of an organization, a Jal Samwad (Water Dialogue) was held on January 11, 2002. The delegates, comprising of community leaders, pledged their support, thus giving the necessary impetus to the formalization process.
On January 15, 2002, the alliance was formally instituted as a Trust, and named Jal Bhagirathi Foundation. The new organization took upon itself the dual responsibility of working towards creating an environment of Gram Swaraj – that of a dynamic, self-reliant and responsive village community and positioning its work and learning at the national level for further replication and contributing towards the ongoing debate of pro-poor policies and creation of village republics through a well thought out advocacy strategy.

A Board of trustees, whose members are the following, leads the Foundation: Rajendra Singh, Prithvi Raj Singh, Maharaja Gaj Singh and Maharani Hemlata Rajye.
Organizational Design for Democratising Development

JBF has adopted a multifold strategy to attain its goal of facilitating Gram Swaraj. This strategy involves ecological security, economic revival, strengthening democratic governance through village-level institutions, developing a cadre of local volunteers, and networking with government agencies, research organizations and other non-government organizations to facilitate policy reforms.

Such an approach demands extensive and exhaustive interactions with villagers, community leaders, people’s representatives, development workers, government officials, researchers, professionals, subject experts and donor organizations. To do this, JBF has instituted an organizational structure that is a unique amalgam of village-level volunteers and a professional resource base.

The village-level volunteers are being assisted by the professional and technical workforce in effectively adopting a rights-based approach by sensitizing and mobilizing communities, and by planning, implementing and monitoring of development interventions for strengthening the process of self-governance in the region. This partnership aims at building capacities of the volunteers to enable them to deal with micro-level development works independently. The professional workforce is also involved in generating socially sound technical innovations, facilitating policy advocacy and networking with concerned agencies. The organizational structure, therefore, has three main components the people, the programs and the executives.

The people component is the determining factor in JBF attaining its vision of a dynamic and self-reliant village community. This component is expected to initiate, sustain and strengthen micro-level governance by developing committed volunteers, through whom the rural communities will be activated to address their problems. The component involves Jal Karmis and Jal Sabhas, Jal Samitis and the Jal Parishad local representations at the village, block and division levels, respectively.

The program component organizes and oversees execution of work. It consists of Resource Groups, which include a Program Officer, two or more Community Organizers and Resource Persons (Technical).
The Resource Groups facilitate the work of village-level institutions by providing professional and technical skills in project designing, planning, training, mobilization etc. To highlight the gender concerns of the Foundation and give special emphasis to programs for the benefit of women, a *Mahila Mandal* or a Women’s Self-Help Group has been set up in each block for their inclusion in the development process. A strong accounts section has been established to maintain financial control, ensure optimum utilization of funds, report to the Trust Board and partners, and enable monitoring.

Project Coordinators are involved in conducting primary monitoring and evaluation of project activities. Independent reviews of the activities, process documentation, and building capacities of the members of the organization are undertaken by independent consultants. JBF has also set up an internal evaluation system: an external agency has been given charge of conducting financial as well as management audits regularly.

The executive body of the Foundation is the Board of Trustees and its Chief Executive is the Managing Trustee. All JBF functionaries report to him and he is responsible for the management of the Foundation. He is assisted by the program component of the Foundation and interacts with its members through a monthly review meeting to assess past performances and develop future strategies. A Program Management Group has been constituted to assist him in keeping tabs on the program. The Managing Trustee also receives support from a multi-disciplinary advisory council, called Appraisal Committee, which includes stakeholders, senior volunteers and professionals. This Committee provides independent feedback on the activities of the Trust. *(Diagram describing the organisational setup on the next page)*

**Institutionalising Operational Systems**

To reinforce and establish decentralization of responsive local governance through effective village-level institutions, JBF has adopted participatory process as an institutional approach. The operational process involves eliciting people’s involvement and making them accountable towards programatic interventions. To facilitate such an approach, JBF has entrusted the supervisory
ORGANISATION SETUP OF JAL BHAGIRATHI FOUNDATION

Board of Trustees

Community Institutions
- Jal Sabha
- Jal Samiti
- Jal Parishad
- Jal Sansad

Resource Group
- RG Leader / Cluster Coordinator
- Resource Persons
- Community Organiser
- Jal Karmis

Program Management
- RCG
- RU Unit
- RG Leaders
- MSR
- PC
- Accounts Officers
and management responsibilities to the community and limited its role to that of a catalyst and facilitator through well-structured organizational processes.

The Foundation's area of operation has been divided into four functional units, referred to as blocks. Each block has been further divided into clusters of villages. The identification process of potential clusters in the region is initiated either through public meetings, *padyatras* (walks), *jal yatras* (water walks) or local workshops. When distressed communities or villages approach the organization for support to initiate development work in their village, village clusters are identified based on a set of criteria. The first and foremost criterion is the level of distress in the cluster due to the fragile ecosystem, economic backwardness, depleting natural resources and the high incidence of livelihood insecurity. The members of the organization conduct a preliminary survey to find out the exact status. The potential of the village community to collectively prioritize, identify, execute and supervise the work is another criterion that is accorded significant importance. Last but not least, technical feasibility is also a crucial factor. Analysis of all the three criteria helps the organization identify the potential clusters.

After the completion of the identification process, a *Jal Sabha* of those who are willing to collectively participate in the proposed work is formed. This is followed by the election of office bearers who act on behalf of all the members of the *Jal Sabha* and undertake the execution of the work and mobilization of community resources. The *Sabha* initiates discussion at the community level, prioritizes the issue to be addressed, decides on the form and ways of generating the village contribution and finally, shares the action plan along with its technical and financial details with JBF. Subsequently, the community and JBF negotiate the rates of the proposed program and strategies to optimally utilize the resources for achieving the desired results.

After arriving at a consensus on program execution and management, the proposal is submitted to the block office. Similar proposals from other villages are collected and shared with the *Jal Samiti* a forum consisting of members of *Jal Sabhas* and community leaders. Involvement of the *Jal Samiti*
Jal Bhagirathi Foundation ensures equity and transparency in disbursement of the limited resources among the different villages.

Following this block-level scrutiny, the proposal is presented to the Jal Parishad at Jodhpur for approval of grants. In the meantime, a village-level worker is nominated by the Jal Sabha to oversee the work, and mobilize and generate community contribution for the proposed program.

Large private contributions (exceeding 50 per cent of the village contribution) by a single donor are discouraged so that the community as a whole participates. Community resources are also mobilized in the form of labor, material and cash. Prior to program execution, the Jal Sabha also forms a women's group. As part of the mobilization effort, it tries to ensure that at least 25 per cent of the local volunteers are women who will be assisted to develop their capacity to organize other local women. Women are also being assisted and encouraged to develop alternative means of livelihood and formed into self-help groups to generate other sources of income for their families.

Throughout the program duration, the JBF representative is available at the cluster level to constantly interact with and build capacities of village volunteers and Jal Sabhas. The representative is also involved in informing the people about crucial government plans, programs, policies and schemes. This approach enhances the supervision, negotiation, articulation and management skills of the villagers, thereby helping them, in establishing knowledgeable, vibrant and assertive village communities.

**Learning the New Ways**

*Adaptations*

Since its birth, JBF has been persistently making efforts to augment its effectiveness and outreach, maximize its proficiency and utilize its experiential learning for the organization's evolution and development. The Foundation is clear about its goal and vision: establishing *village republics* as the basic unit for enabling democratic development processes in the region. JBF's commitment to its vision is evident from the number of amendments that it has made in its operational processes to match its objectives.
So far, there have been four distinct approaches that the organization has put into practice and tested for impact. Initially, the Jal Chetna Yatra was the only way of inspiring villagers to conserve water.

The process centered on public meetings in which the JBF Board of Trustees interacted with the local people and motivated them to become self-sufficient. A nodal person was identified in these meetings to carry forward the work in the stipulated region.

But JBF was also keen to extend its outreach to the remote villages in the region. To do this effectively, it sought assistance from its partnering agency the Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS). TBS has gathered extensive experience in social mobilization and engineering while working in the villages of Alwar: it helped JBF develop a comprehensive pro-poor development approach, thus aligning it with the marginalized sections of the society, a crucial component in any effort towards creating village republics. The nuances of building partnerships with villages, making them accountable for their own work, creating structures of self-reliance, and finding out ways of reviving village-based management were shared. The strategies were later established as JBF’s practice the foundation of JBF’s procedures and processes, therefore, were the realistic learning of TBS. However, the differences in social, cultural and economic profiles between the villages of Alwar and the Marwar region became an impediment in entirely replicating the TBS model in the region. Another difficulty was the level of people’s expectations from what they viewed as an initiative of the House of Marwar. Here we could see the limitations.

Despite these limitations of the TBS model in the context of Marwar, JBF persisted with the core values that TBS had imparted through its experience sharing. The Foundation learnt the importance of integrating village-level institutions with its own structure to further strengthen the process of rights-based development. Therefore, it decided to identify village-level workers, sensitise them, build their aptitude towards local governance, provide necessary exposure and equip them with the skills needed to undertake the responsibility of creating a region with self-reliant villages.
This strategy was undertaken to ensure proactive involvement of the local people and to create a cadre of committed and enthusiastic workers who will have the capability and tenacity to take the movement forward.

This approach helped JBF in identifying efficient cadres of volunteers, who had all the necessary skills to help the Foundation realize its vision.

While working closely with the volunteer groups, JBF realized that to sustain their interest levels the responsibilities needed to be addressed by them in increments. It also felt the need to streamline the enthusiasm and commitment of the volunteer groups for enhancing their output. To develop effective village-level institutions and efficient cadres of volunteers, JBF not only decided to restrict its operations to four of the seven districts in the region Jodhpur, Barmer, Pali and Jalore but also identified the administrative blocks in each of these districts for executing its programs. This approach adopted by the organization is fully supported by a well laid out process which is based on creating effective and accountable village-level institutions with the help of strong cadres of local volunteers. These volunteers, in turn, are supported by professionals. The purpose of this partnership is to create capacities of the volunteers and enable them to lead development initiatives at the local level without external support.

Reviving the Structures of Community Self-Reliance

JBF’s programs, activities and strategies all aim towards one goal: involving, empowering and making the village community self-reliant. The strategy adopted to realize this is by organizing and strengthening community groups to identify and address issues that will help them attain social security, ecological self-sufficiency, economic adequacy and stronger people-led processes.

Prior to initiating work at the village level, members of the organization interact intensively with the village community. Through this interface, the process of social cohesion gets initiated, apolitical individuals get identified to lead the development practices, the community develops a perspective of equitable and sustainable resource management and most importantly, people
converge to prioritize their issues of concern and subsequently develop a common strategy to address their problems.

The community is then trained to undertake collective action. While orienting the community, conscious effort is made to reinforce values such as equitable accessibility and utilization of resources, prioritizing the problems of the disadvantaged section, resolving conflicts before initiating the work and adhering to the norms that have been collectively decided for the upkeep of the assets created within the village. JBF emphasizes on preparing a strong foundation to ensure the sustenance and effectiveness of all development work and to instill confidence within the community.

These initial developments become crucial while undertaking activities that are community oriented — for instance, building of water harvesting structures — since these are critical to ecological regeneration and livelihood systems of the village. The most challenging task confronted by development workers is to ensure that the village community becomes self-reliant and takes the lead to execute, monitor and sustain development work at the village level. JBF members devote all their skills, learning and intellect to contest this demanding situation.

Before initiating water harvesting and natural resource management programs, sufficient time is dedicated to instill the feeling of community ownership amongst the stakeholders. First and foremost, a favorable ambiance is created for the community to voice its concern and to identify the problems it would be interested in addressing. At this stage, JBF takes care to avoid handholding. The community is then given the responsibility to search for plausible solution, detail out its technical specifications, prepare a supporting budget for the intervention and share them with the members of the Foundation.

The comprehensive interaction between the village community and the organization provides dynamism to the whole process of developing community ownership and strengthening the process of local governance. The interaction also bolsters the confidence of the community in its own potential and abilities and in the proficiency of local solutions. People’s enthusiasm and commitment is further consolidated through the Jal Sabha. To ensure sustainability to the
developmental intervention, the community's involvement is not only limited to mere planning of the program but also towards its execution and maintenance. This comprehensive approach equips the community to negotiate and collaborate with other external agencies for institutionalizing self-reliance. Such trends suggest that natural resource-based initiatives, apart from improving the ecology, also reinforce the community's wisdom and become the crucial binding force.

Women's empowerment initiatives also have the potential to perpetuate self-reliance as women's groups are organized around the issue of livelihood security. Women are supported in building and enhancing their own capacities to not only supplement their individual household income, but also to voice their concern and suggest appropriate strategies for reviving the ecology to reduce their drudgery. Another major component for achieving self-reliance is the selection and training of volunteers and village-level workers, who facilitate the learning process of community groups.

*Self-Help Groups*

The project strives to promote women's participation in various activities by promoting their access to economic resources. For this purpose Self Help Groups termed Jal Mandals are constituted. The Jal Mandal members save and deposit money in a group fund on a regular basis. The members use this group fund to fulfill their everyday consumptive needs and initiate income generating activities. The objective of the Alternative Livelihood and Income Generating activities (ALIGA) program is to link all the groups with income generating activities (IGA).

Apart from credit and savings, JBF also facilitates group members to take up other issues like health and hygiene, social evils-child marriage, girl child education. These SHGs provide a platform to local women for discussing their day-to-day problems and issues. In Agolai where many cases of AIDS have been reported, JBF has made an attempt to increase awareness about the diseases- its mode of transmission and preventive steps to be taken.
Managing the Commons

Despite its vulnerable ecosystem and inhospitable terrain, western Rajasthan remains the world’s most densely populated desert. For years, local natural depositories have supported the population by supplying its basic requirements for survival — water, biomass, fodder and fuelwood.

This was possible only because desert societies in the region attached sanctity and value to the core principles of conservation, equity and controlled utilization of natural resources. Ecological prudence was perpetuated through a matrix of Agor (water catchment), Gauchar (pastureland) and Oran (sacred groves) — the AGO.

This AGO matrix has been developed, protected and controlled by people’s institutions for centuries. This has contributed towards sustaining the local economy, catalyzing benefits from natural resources and — most importantly — institutionalizing an equitable pattern of resource accessibility and utilization. Therefore, efforts were made to integrate the three components of the AGO matrix to achieve ecological revival and social reorganization.

Advocating for Water

Rajasthan Jal Abhiyan (Rajasthan Water Campaign)

Jal Bhagirathi Foundation had been chosen as a nodal NGO for Jodhpur division under Government of Rajasthan’s “Rajasthan Jal Abhiyan” or Water Literacy Campaign to create awareness among the citizens about sustainable water management practices. The campaign was launched to realise the critical situation of water, to gain an understanding of the efforts to be made to utilise the water economically and to discuss saving in wastage of water and demand management. The foundation had worked with the Division administration to disseminate the message of water conservation and sustainable management of scarce resources.
Team members of JBF accompanied the government officials with the “water rathas” (water tankers) and held discussions with community members for creating mass awareness and to change the mind set of people. The second phase of the Jal Abhiyan included construction activities of water saving and conserving devices with peoples active participation in the form of labour and money.

**Shiv Ganga Peyjal Pariyojna (Shiv Ganga Drinking Water Project)**
The Shiv Ganga Peyjal Pariyojna (drinking water program) was launched on 5th May 2005 from the Jal Ashram at Jodhpur. Water was distributed through hired tankers to public storage structures and the community tankas in villages and hamlets.

**Jal Chetna Yatra (Water Consciousness Rally)**
Initially, the Jal Chetna Yatra was the only way of inspiring villagers to conserve water. The process centered on public meetings in which the JBF Board of Trustees interacted with the local people and motivated them to become self-sufficient. Footwalks and meetings with village communities were organized for this purpose. As a result the village community spontaneously came forward and commenced construction of water harvesting structures. A nodal person was identified in these meetings to carry forward the work in the stipulated region.

**Jal Chetna Samvad (Dialogue for Water Consciousness)**
This was a Water Awareness Dialogue organized by JBF. It was attended by close to 300 prominent community leaders from all the Districts of Jodhpur. The objectives of the campaign were to create awareness about the Jal Bhagirathi program and educate the participants. Group discussions were organized on various topics like water harvesting prospects in the area, identification of relevant structures in the area and Women’s participation & empowerment. This campaign saw the participation of enthusiastic community members voicing their anxiety over the increasing water crisis in the region.
Jal Shiksha Abhiyan (Water Literacy Campaign)
The Jal Shiksha Abhiyan or Water Literacy Campaign was organized by JBF. The objective of this campaign was to create awareness among the people about water management practices. The campaign was used as a platform to educate the people about conservation of water and management of the scarce water resources. This movement was used to build the capacity of depressed communities and institutionalizing effective water governance in the region.

Jal Chetna Shivir (Camp for Water Consciousness)
This was a Mass Mobilization and Training Camp that was organized by the Jal Bhagirathi Foundation. It created awareness among the community members regarding the benefits of traditional water harvesting practices and helped to build their capacity to adopt such practices. This campaign culminated a huge response from the village communities. It was attended by close to 8000 men and women and 150 community leaders. People from different villages and communities came together to join hands launch a community driven water management. A huge number of people came forward spontaneously and became a part of this movement.

Vatavarn Nirman Yatra (Rally for Building the Environment)
The Vatavarn Nirman Yatra was organized in Balotra and Ahore block of Barmer and Jalore district in Marwar covering 6 villages. The Yatra was spearheaded by the Chairman of the Foundation Maharaja Gaj Singh, Vice Chairman Rajendra Singh and the Managing Trustee Prithvi Raj Singh. The objective of the yatra was to build up rapport with the community and to introduce them to Jal Bhagirathi Foundation and its initiatives. The yatra also served to select the neediest villages and subsequently define project cluster.
Examining the Success of the Efforts of JBF

Above was the first part of this chapter where we have described the background of the region where the Foundation is working, its genesis, methodology and organisational set up. In the following part we will be discussing the impact of the work of the Foundation and its sociological analysis in accordance with the aims and objectives of the study. We would also be trying to look into the research questions which this study is trying to address.

We will begin with the role of village institutions in expedite the aims and objectives of the Foundation and will proceed to overall gamut of the institutions, people and the Foundation in conserving the traditional institutions and practices of water conservation in the region. This will not be just a discussion of the work but an analysis in sociological parlance and traditions.

JBF has been working in the region in rural areas and the villages are the main units of social and administrative set up of the region. Sociologically speaking Indian villages have been a universe in itself as they have been able to provide all the needs of an individual from his / her birth to death. In this regard the villages and their clusters based on caste or other traditional allegiances, of the region have also been able to mobilize people for any significant cause of social relevance.

Reinventing the Wisdom of Village Institutions

Marwar follows the customary division of population into endogamous semi-professional groups, traditionally know as jatis or caste. Although land reforms, economic transition and the democratic change in India have reduced the professional differences between castes groups in recent years, pastoral specialist castes like the raika and the raibari continue to dominate herding, and the village elites, the rajputs and brahmins, retain much of their trational status. (Omvedt, 1978)

Caste elites, pastoral specialist, and the marginal producers, whether men or women, all rely on village pastures and forests, and household economies depend on the biotic resources available in these lands. Ongoing
justice, settle conflicts, and arbitrate disputes on the use and abuse of community resources (Altekar, 1958). Village panchayats might be made up of elders from several castes, meeting to arbitrate intercaste disputes or other village-wide concerns. In either case, punishments usually involve fines or the threat of expulsion and ostracism from the community or village (Gallanter, 1989). Thus the structure of authority beneath these councils was a strong, normative one. The oran, a sacred forest and pasture, was also likely in place by this time. The origins of these orans are impossible to determine, but many of them date from long before Mughal conquest. The term oran derives from the Sanskrit word for forest, araniya and these lands were dedicated to local gods, goddesses, or saints, and were protected from destructive extraction, private cultivation and encroachment (Robbins, 1998).

This basic and crucial characteristic must be borne in mind while making an effort to initiate an ecological, economic and social revival of the region, and JBF has done just that. The Foundation believes that involvement of the local community and its healthy interaction with neighbouring villages is critical for improvement in the ecosystem and the overall development of the region.

People's participation is effective due to various reasons. One, villagers are able to relate better to their local ecosystems. Two, micro-level planning by the people takes cognizance of the specific local problems, resource base, requirements, possible limitations and the social structure. Three, local governance perpetuates a sense of ownership, prudence, discipline and equity.

The Foundation believes that villagers can attain this and much more only if there is an effective village-level institution. This institution works towards generating cohesion, motivating people, and providing a local platform to control and manage the ecosystem and to resolve disputes. JBF emphasizes on strengthening such institutions for facilitating democratic development processes by partnering with primary stakeholders and local communities, and limiting its own role to that of a catalyst and facilitator. However, when one examines these efforts sociologically, it is found that the traditional psyche has not changed over the years. Many of the elders in villages still consider
all the studied villages and they congregate when they were called for. They maintain the minute register and records of visits. In one case no women was present at the meeting and at another only two out of seven members were present.

At block level is the Jal Samiti (Water Development Group), which consists of members of Jal Sabhas and community leaders from the region. While interacting at this level, the members develop a comprehensive perspective of not only the Foundation's work, but also of the critical issues and emerging problems in the region. Periodic meetings induce interaction between village representatives and help them collectively assess the prevailing situation, voice their concern, develop strategies to counter problems, and advocate and build equituous systems for managing and disbursing resources within the block. This, in turn, strengthens local governance patterns and provides an opportunity to the representatives to institutionalize it beyond the boundary of a single village. The Jal also makes an attempt to amicably resolve disputes emerging due to either sharing of or using the limited available resources.

Finally, the water forum or the Jal Parishad at the level of the division involves knowledgeable and enthusiastic community leaders in deciding on macro-level issues. These leaders assist the organization in developing future strategies and providing a road map for consolidating democratic processes. They also contribute in initiating and holding a dialogue with state representatives at all levels, advocating for developing pro-poor and pro-people policies.

The diverse responsibilities shouldered by village representatives at different levels contribute towards institutionalizing local-governance in the region. At overall level the work of JBF has been satisfactory though there are some problems at the level of participation of disadvantaged sections and women and in the voluntarism of the community. Most of the people who participate in the efforts are those who are directly benefiting from such efforts. But there is another consideration. In most of the villages, men usually migrate to cities to work and it is women, elderly and children who are left behind. They
usually suffer from scarcity of water and it becomes a question of survival, which at times forces them to support such efforts.

In the recent times, after democratic decentralization through Panchayati Raj, the villagers have become more conscious of their rights and political processes. Panchayat elections every fives years have made them more vocal in putting their demands forward. Most of them, particularly the youngsters who are educated and who have seen the world ahead of their villages know the dynamics of NGOs or civil society. They understand its role in institution building and helping people, which some of them use and some misuse. We came across a youth in Jhitra who was initially involved with the works of JBF but when his interests were not served, he left the JBF. Now he usually interferes with the work of JBF volunteers in many unwanted ways. Such instances are very common in the region.

Reinstating Best of the Practices

JBF has a committed team of volunteers and professionals who manage the functioning of the organisation. But what are also important and significant is the role of traditional community leaders and the dominant castes of a village. This region was directly ruled by the Maharaja and the Royal House of Marwar just sixty years ago. This is not a very long time for the traditional loyalties to go away. Thus there is already a network of the kinship structure and traditional authority which works for the JBF, though indirectly.

A cadre of committed volunteers — local representatives — is a must for restoring egalitarianism, generating self-reliance, leading development interventions, rejuvenating village communities and ensuring their accountability to their work. This is the belief the Foundation is determined to strengthen, disseminate and popularise at all levels. To do this, it has developed a well-structured plan of action to transform the region by mainstreaming and enhancing the potential and involvement of volunteers.

JBF has strategised to accomplish this through a Jal Ashram — a fountainhead of all its organizational activities. The ashram will provide valuable exposure and orientation to volunteers, as well as learnings through
sharing of experiences. Familiarizing the volunteers with issues concerning livelihood security, social justice, ecological regeneration and effective governance patterns will help them develop a comprehensive perspective and sensitize them about issues at micro and macro levels. The learnings will inculcate a feeling of community service and enhance their involvement in strengthening the peoples’ voice, either as development workers, community members, grassroots functionaries or potential responsive leaders. Involved volunteer groups will mobilize the community and work along with them to address their concerns. While doing so, they will create an environment for institutionalizing a rights-based approach to promote sustainable development and social justice in India’s rural society.

To ensure wider replicability of the development partnership model between local volunteers and the village community, the ashram will be involved in developing cadres of new volunteers through an intensive and meaningful learning process. The approach will entail functional and conceptual knowledge dissemination through interaction with development workers, grassroots functionaries, government officials and civil society groups from all over India. The orientation procedure will also adopt dissemination of ‘best practices’ in community management, decentralized governance, community mobilization and control of natural resources from all across the country.

Alongside, the volunteer groups will also be exposed to unproductive and failed development initiatives to make them conscious of the nuances of such development interventions. The orientation will be through innovative and constructive learnings by foster partnerships for experience sharing, networking and policy advocacy.

The ashram will be the venue of national and regional conferences, workshops and symposiums to provide a forum for exchange of ideas and exposure to different points of view. It will create public awareness, provide a platform to voice pro-poor concerns, and optimize social cohesion and emotive bonding among communities through continued interaction.

The Jal Ashram — a conclave of ideas, perspectives and plausible strategies — will contribute and steer the existing dialogue of converging
theoretical information and practical experiences in management of natural resources and social engineering. The ashram will also strengthen the existing civil society networks to provide impetus to the volunteer model for promoting and consolidating community participation in ecological regeneration and pro-poor initiatives. As community members from across the state and even the country gather at the ashram, it will be strengthening disadvantaged people-oriented policies and strategies that the state should adopt at local, regional and national levels.

To uphold the quality and impact of the ashram, JBF will house its entire program component at the same location. This will help JBF disseminate and popularize its belief in enhancing the potential of local human resources for spearheading development work.

**Traditional Authority meets Modern Institutions: How does it Work?**

By the time the Mughal Empire collapsed in the beginning of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company was more than a hundred years old. Without directly administering most of Rajasthan, the Company, and later the Government of Great Britain, indirectly ruled all of the princely states, including Marwar (Jain 1993; Spear 1986). While Mughal reforms had been in the interest of consolidating political control, British reforms were designed to assure monopoly over resources and trade (Bhattacharya 1972). This would lead to a very different strategy in reform, as the British sought to implement normalized legal system with “modern” ideas of ownership, evidence, and public offence. While colonial officials argued from the moral imperative of legal reform, much of the institutional change was driven by the demands of British bankers and traders who had difficulty recovering money or receiving contractually obligated goods or services (Jain 1994). Through their efforts, central courts were established, and local officials were pressed to circumvent traditional legal authorities. In villages, the enforcement of this new legal code did a great deal to undermine the power and authority of village panchayats. Dispute settlement continued to be managed by local bodies to this day,
however, and the power of traditional law was likely not destroyed entirely during the reform period (Gallanter 1989)

The net results of the institutional changes brought by the British Raj to Rajasthan included a decline in the power of local panchayat bodies and a decrease in local villagers' control over an access to community land. Even so, panchayat authority survived in the wake of these social and legal changes, and even colonial representatives who contributed to the hegemony of central power admitted to the pervasiveness of the “useful panchayats” during this period (Todd, 1920: 171). Oran and Gocher lands outside of state control were placed under increasing pressur, but they too persisted

An Agor is an integral part of the water sub-system in the village; its size is proportionate to that of the water body. While restoring a water body, equal emphasis was put on increasing its capacity as well as developing its catchment area for longevity and effectiveness. Agors had permanent plantations; in the post-monsoon period, they also provided fodder for livestock and fuelwood for villagers. Traditionally, the management and upkeep of agors has been the responsibility of the community.

Community pasturelands or gauchars, part of the village common property, are also the main support system for livestock economy at the micro level. Despite the frail ecosystem, this natural resource reserve has ensured equal accessibility and availability of fodder, fuelwood and pastures.

Orans are the oldest natural resource depositories in the region. Some of the region's orans are 150-500 years old, while a few might even be 800 years old. Dedicated to deities, local gods and goddesses, sects and martyrs, the oran was and remains the most effective approach to protect and promote biodiversity in the village. In a majority of cases, orans have successfully supported more than one village since centuries — thus exemplifying the culture and practice of collective utilization of limited resources. The responsibility of protecting and managing the orans exists with the village community.

But despite the presence of traditional wisdom for creating ecological security; the situation has deteriorated. The AGO has become a hotbed of ‘non-
Bhakri, in Luni block of Jodhpur district, is located on a small hillock and hence the name, derived from the Rajasthani word bhakar, meaning hillock. Remote and with limited access to basic resources, the village has survived by depending on its bank of traditional knowledge.

The village’s location — between two seasonal rivers, the Luni and the Bandi — should have been a blessing. But it has been the major cause of its problems instead. In 1979, a flood destroyed cultivable lands, changing the livelihood pattern in the process. The groundwater aquifers turned saline. For its drinking water requirement, the village is now dependent on two village nadi (ponds), which in turn depend on the erratic and meager rainfall. The water in these nadi lasts for six to eight months. During the rest of the year, water has to be bought from Satlana, Kudi or Luni; a tanker charges Rs 600-800 for water. A pipeline installed by the government supplies saline water. In dry months, the supply dips to once a week. Those who cannot afford to buy water or do not have storage tanks in their homes, have to depend on wells dug in the river-bed.

Traditional Knowledge at Work
JBF’s first project in Bhakri was the construction of a school tanka (storage tank) and toilets. Bhakri’s new Jal Sabha provided JBF engineers with a design (created by Baga Ram, its local ‘barefoot engineer’) to save the optimum amount of water. After successful completion of this project, the Sabha and JBF began their work on the village nadi. The Jogmaya talab and the Gavai talab are Bhakri’s nadi. The Jal Sabha had to decide which one it wanted to undertake work on. The Gram Sabha (village council) was convened to discuss the issue, and finally it was decided that work on Gavai talab would be more beneficial for the village. The community’s traditional knowledge base was instrumental in affecting this decision and the work that followed.
The Gavai talab is the older of the two nadis. Being ‘ancestral property’, the nadi was expected to be able to generate more contributions. The Gram Sabha also found that the 200-feet catchment area of the Gavai was larger. Some of the Sabha members contended that the spot for the old nadi had been identified because of the “gradient of the land” and the “large agor” (catchment area).

Once the nadi was selected and the JBF team had measured the area for excavation, the Jal Sabha proposed a circular design, which the members felt would “retain more water, allow livestock to drink more easily, and make it safer for children playing on its banks as the gradient is more gradual”. To maximize the potential of the project to harvest rain water, Jetha Ram, a local Gajdhari (water engineer), proposed building two feeder canals in the next phase of the project. These would “channel the water not only from the catchment but from the other areas in the village where water collects”. The design of one of these feeder canals is particularly innovative — it channels the water flow around the nadi so that the force of the water does not destroy the bank. Bhakri’s elders believe that these canals would bring twice the amount of water to the village nadi. They should know, as Champa Lal, the secretary of the Jal Sabha, says: “The villagers have knowledge that has been passed down from their forefathers.”

The capacity of the Gavai talab has now increased from 15,000 cubic meters (cu m) to 23,888 cu m. The total cost of the project has been Rs 1,58,907, in which the village contributed Rs 40,000. Interestingly, the total cash collected through contributions, which went towards paying for diesel, was only Rs 26,000; Bhakri’s four tractor owners contributed the rest as labour.

The house of Sundari, a Meena woman, has no storage tank; helped by her two older children, Sundari gets 10 pots of water every day for her seven-member family. When the village nadi runs dry, she walks two-three kms to neighbouring villages. Her family owns five goats and a cow. While the goats are taken to the wells in the river-bed, she has to carry water home for her cow. If the nadi did not dry up, she would “spend less time collecting water and invest that time in labour to make more money”.

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Village – Bhandiyawas
Block - Balotara, District – Barmer

Systems of traditional water management may fall into disuse over the years, but villages in this region of Rajasthan do have a deep-rooted and strong tradition of public work. This was apparent in the community water initiative seen in Bhandiawas village in Balotra block of Barmer. Here, the villagers revived the traditional approach of shramdaan (voluntary labour for common good) thus made clear their enthusiasm to manage things on their own. The most striking achievement of the Bhandiawas Jal Sabha has been the system that it has instituted to generate consensus and contribution within the village towards the water harvesting work.

In Bhandiyawas, the village nadi is the only source of drinking water. Even in a good monsoon year, the water harvesting structure only provides water for eight months. The other source of water is the government pipeline, which supplies saline water — and that too, irregularly. Women in the village spend their entire day collecting water, begging for it from the richer households.

In Bhandiawas, each household spends Rs 4,000 on an average on water in the four dry months. One 4,500-litre tanker of water costs Rs 500-600. A minimum of two tankers is required in a month to meet the water need. During dry months, the poorer families are forced to take ‘water loans’ at exorbitant interest rates ranging from 24-60 per cent annually. In addition to the cost of water, each household spends Rs 2,500 on an average every month on other expenses. The average size of land holdings is 4-5 hectares which, with only one rain-fed crop a year, gives an average yield worth Rs 5,000. This puts the villagers in a vicious cycle of debt and repayment.

The Initiation
The JBF team initiated its interaction with the Bhandiawas villagers on one Akha Teej, a local festival. Following the first few meetings, a Jal Sabha was formed and a working committee was nominated to shoulder the responsibility of generation of contribution and the revival and monitoring of the water
harvesting structure. The Sabha nominated Nain Dan, a senior member from the village’s well-respected Charan community, as its chairperson. Under his leadership and guidance, the Jal Sabha was able to generate high levels of participation and enthusiasm amongst the villagers.

**Reviving Shramdaan**

The Sabha members went around the village, meeting individual households for creating awareness and motivating people to contribute towards a collective good. The contribution was decided depending on the size of the households, their income, the amount of land and livestock owned, and ownership of tankers or tractors. One hundred of the poorest households were identified and their contribution was set at Rs 200. Those unable to pay cash were expected to contribute through shramdaan. Joint families whose members worked as labourers, were expected to make a minimum contribution of Rs 500. The richer households made contributions ranging from Rs 1,000 to Rs 5,000. One of the most interesting outcomes, according to Nain Dan, was that the “collections exceeded by far the minimum contribution of the Rs 0.1 million required”. The village collected Rs 0.15 million, and this Nain Dan attributes to the stringent policing methods followed by the committee members. In fact, Nain Dan often took the lead in this: he would go to wedding celebrations (davats) of the rich Jat families and “refuse to eat before the house head pledged a contribution towards the water harvesting structure”.

*Tejan, a Bhil woman, has a small tanka (storage tank) in her house with a storage capacity of 3,500 litres. A full tanka lasts for 15 days. Hers is a nine-member household and they own seven goats. This tanka had not been filled for a month because the family did not have the money to buy water. During dry months, the family depends on the saline water supplied by the government pipeline.*
CHIRADIA

The people of Rajasthan are known for their sensitivity towards water and their willingness to conserve its every drop. However, communities today have chosen to move away from their local wisdom and have become dependent on government dole and other external sources for ensuring water security. But Chiradia in Barmer district, is a village that believes in its potential and capability to address its problems locally. To overcome their water woes, the villagers did not wait for the JBF to approach them; instead, they tracked JBF down with a proposal for reviving their dead nadi.

But before approaching JBF, they raised 25 per cent contribution within the village. They visited water harvesting structures which had been revived with JBF’s help and interacted with Jal Sabhas which had implemented similar works in their villages. According to Sawai Singh, the initiator of the project, “We were willing to make an investment that would benefit the village, but not before conducting a thorough investigation of the organization and its works.”

For its drinking water, Chiradia relies on the village nadi, excavated around 100 years ago; the nadi has a well by its side. Due to the nadi’s small size and silting over the years, its water lasts only six months in a year. For the remaining months, tankers supply water at Rs 250-600 each. The village does have a government pipeline for water. But this supply comes from Gondo ka Bada, which lies at a lower level from Chiradia — as a result, the water supply is erratic due to lack of pressure. According to Ganga Singh, a Jal Sabha member, each household in Chiradia is fortunate enough to have a storage tank and the capacity to pay, spends Rs 6,000-7,000 every year on water.

An Enlightened Community

Sawai Singh first heard about JBF when he learnt about the Foundation’s work in Piparli, an adjoining village. He and other community leaders visited the water harvesting structure at Piparli and were “impressed with the work”. The team returned to Chiradia and convened a meeting of the village community;
the villagers were asked if they would be willing to contribute. The community felt it was “worth its while to make a contribution towards the solution to its water problem”.

The nadi was measured and it was agreed that the excavation project would cost Rs 4,00,000 — which meant the village would have to raise a contribution of Rs 1,00,000 (25 per cent). Dungar Ram Chaudhry agreed to make the entire contribution on behalf of the community, but it was eventually decided that each household would contribute depending on its ability to pay.

The contributions flowed in, ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 2,500. Once the contributions were collected, the villagers were faced with a problem: they found out that JBF did not work in the district of Barmer. They decided to wait; the money was set aside. It was a year-long vigil. When villagers of Piparli informed their neighbours in Chiradia that JBF had finally reached Barmer, the village leaders went to Uttesar to see the JBF project and meet the Uttesar Jal Sabha members, through whom they were finally able to initiate a dialogue with JBF.

The JBF team helped constitute the Chiradia Jal Sabha and agreed to the excavation work. After detailed discussions, it was decided that a JCB (a machine to excavate earth) would be required to complete the work successfully. The Jal Sabha managed to negotiate and bring down the JCB rate from Rs 26 to Rs 23.5 per cubic meter, and the work was begun.

Ghiji is a Devasi widow. She cannot afford to pay for water. She has one hectare of land, which yields one rain-fed crop a year — the average annual earning from this is Rs 2,500. Ghiji earns another Rs 1,000 from her 40 sheep, and Rs 40 per day when she does manual labour. She has to support her family of five on this income. In a water crisis, she takes loans to share the cost of a tanker to fill her brother-in-law’s storage tank. She has yet to pay off a loan of Rs 20,000 which she took for her daughter’s wedding. But Ghiji has hope. She feels “giving Rs 200 towards the water harvesting structure has been a wise choice, as it would benefit her and the entire village”.

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though there is an undying faith in the local deity, it stems from a deeper understanding of the importance of conserving water and natural resources.

The temple is not only connected with water — it also plays a crucial role in providing livelihoods. Offerings to Bhomiaji include clay figurines of horses and sheets of white cloth. The clay horses are made by kumhars (potters) in the neighbouring village of Chirarli; the temple sustains them through the year. Similarly, the sheets are made by tailors in Godawas and Chirarli.

The Water Harvesting Structure
Earlier, the village had spent Rs 80,000 to work on the extremely hard and rocky soil using a Hitachi machine. However, as Hanuman Ram points out, this was “not enough to retain water all year round”. When JBF approached him, Ram jumped at the opportunity. He and Bhik Ram, the temple priest, convinced the village community of JBF’s sincerity. The result: a 25-member committee was set up. The project cost was fixed at Rs 4,00,000 and Rs 1,00,000 was immediately contributed from the temple fund.

It is a wonderful relationship (and not just blind faith) that the villagers of Godawas share with their presiding deity — and with water. It is a two-way stream. The villagers invest in their Bhomiaji. They make offerings and pray that their wishes be granted. These very offerings come back to them in the form of a more resource-secure life, as they are used for work on the village water harvesting structure

When in dire straits, Godawas puts its faith in the village deity: Bhomiaji. Bhika Ram, the treasurer of the local Jal Sabha and the priest of the Bhomiaji temple, says: “Rohting Bhomia was a Jat landlord who lived in the village 100 years ago. He had a deep concern for the land, the people and the cattle. He would take his bullock cart every day to work on the nadi. Motivated by this, the villagers joined him in his endeavor and this tradition is still followed. A temple was erected in Rohting Bhomia’s honour after his death, as he died protecting the cattle of the village.” The pond is called gau kund (cattle pond). People from Godawas as well as neighbouring villages make regular offerings at the temple. Forty years ago, one of the temple priests pledged that all offerings to the temple would only be used on the water harvesting structure; the tradition has endured.
Village – Khichiyon Ka Daipara
Block - Luni, District – Jodphur

The village of Daipara, in Luni block, has a population of 2,200. There are 500 children in the village, 372 of whom attend the local government school. The only source of drinking water for all these people is the village nadi. In the dry season, the village gets tankers of water at Rs 400-500 per tanker.

The School Tanka
When JBF approached the village with its proposal for reviving its water harvesting structure, the community suggested that work be done on a tanka (storage tank) at the village school instead. In 2001, the village had raised Rs 4,000 and made a small 7,000-litre tanka, informed Gop Singh, the local schoolteacher; but the tanka had broken down within two years. Their previous experience with the tanka had made some members of the village community rather sceptical, but the JBF team managed to convince them by explaining how the Jal Sabha and its office bearers would oversee and implement the project.

The Jal Sabha decided to build a tanka with a capacity of 60,000 litres at a cost of Rs 86,245; of this amount, the village was expected to contribute Rs 21,562. Except for the 15 families which were below the poverty line, every household in the village donated Rs 100.

The Jal Dal (Water Group)
What stands out as an exemplary feature in this village is the way in which the school children have organized themselves to bear complete responsibility of the maintenance of their tanka. Constituted into a Jal Dal (Water Group), the students, led by Bhawani Ram (the elected captain of the Dal), have taken charge of keeping the tanka clean and functioning.

Sharing Responsibility
The Dal has been divided into three groups of three students each. Two groups are responsible for cleaning the two outlets where the water collects before it
Village – Maliyon ki Dhani
Block - Pachpadra, District – Barmer

Undaunted by the acute water shortage it faces, a village community decides to pool its resources to provide water for travellers at the local bus stop. As an act of complete selflessness, this one stands apart.

Maliyaon ki Dhani is a small village of the Mali community in the district of Barmer. Acutely aware of the plight of people from their village as well as neighbouring villages who had to wait for hours under the scorching sun for the bus, the community decided that it was its “duty” to provide water for the travellers.

Every day, 30 people take the bus from the village to neighbouring Pachpadra to work in a factory. The adults earn Rs 60 per day, while the younger ones get Rs 40; Rs 10 is spent every day on bus fare.

Maliyaon ki Dhani has a nadi. When the nadi runs dry, usually for seven months in a year, tankers of water are bought from Newai and Thob for Rs 200-400.

In spite of such difficult conditions, this community chose to help its neighbouring communities before it had even dealt with its own water-related problems. The village has built a community tanka; but even before this tanka was built, water was kept at the bus stop and one of the village boys would be paid a nominal fee to ensure that the earthen pots were kept full and that the travellers got water. Regular commuters to Pachpadra were asked to contribute Rs 10 on occasion.

Maliyaon ki Dhani is surrounded by villages and hamlets holding about 500 households. All these communities use this bus stop which receives 10 buses daily. Hastimal, the Jal Sabha chairperson, found that “filling up the matkas (earthen pots) regularly was very time consuming”. Building a tanka at the bus stop was a solution. So when the Jal Sabha was approached by JBF, the members immediately proposed this community tanka project, the first and only one of its kinds. According to Damadar Sant, the village priest, “the region has a long-standing tradition of building community tankas for travellers”. There are two tankas near Pachpadra, built 50 and 80 years ago respectively. The
Jal Bhagirathi Foundation project was duly initiated. No limits were set for contributions. Thirty households made donations ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 400.

The Structure
The village decided to make a 26,000-litre capacity tanker, the cost for which was accurately estimated at Rs 30,000. Twenty-five per cent of the money was to be contributed by the village. The money was used to buy cement, bricks and concrete; records of these, as well as for the additional transport costs, were meticulously maintained by Hastimal.

The newly-built tanker is 3.5 meters wide and 3.6 meters deep. Though it did manage to collect some rain water, "it was not enough, so it has been filled with tankers funded by another contribution from the village," says Hastimal. A tanker sourcing water from the village nadi costs just Rs 100. In building this unique tanker, the community of Maliyaon ki Dhani has demonstrated a rare level of social responsibility and commitment.

Nathu has a family of nine members and her average monthly expenditure is Rs 2,000 a month, which is also her average income. She has a small 500-litre storage tank in her house, but it hardly meets her needs. According to Nathu, "interest rates on loans go up during the dry season". As a result of this, water loans become a huge liability for people like her.
References


