

Water

Storm in a water pot

Social activist Nafisa Barot recalls how water unleashed the powerful energies of women in Gujarat



Digital painting: Tarique Aziz

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The temperature in the Bhal region of Dhandhuka taluka of Ahmedabad must have been about 48°C, when Devuben from Mingalpur walked from her home to a remote water tank, carrying empty pots. The saline, parched land must have burnt her bare feet. She stood at the empty groundwater tank and prayed for some water through the broken pipe. Government had installed a 100 km-long pipeline to bring water to this tank. It had been three days since any

water had come through the pipeline, and the anxiety, anger and frustration could be seen on her face.

When water finally came, hundreds of women rushed to the tank to fill their vessels. They all had to fight to get two-three pots filled in an unbelievable conflict, resulting in blood dropping in the water.

Devuben only managed to get whatever was left at the bottom of the tank. Being a Dalit, she could not even jostle like others. She had to content herself with one-and-a-half pots of muddy water. Even then she was happy. Inequity gets so easily accepted in a given context! So, at least that day, one to three pots of water could transform the misery, anxiety and frustration of hundreds of women into happiness.

This was, in a nutshell, the story, the drama, that we as the Utthan team observed when we started working in an extremely resource-poor area of Gujarat called Bhal in 1981. We understood that for women water was the major preoccupation for their entire day. It seemed their whole life was around getting enough water for the family and their cattle.

In 1985, an idea of harvesting rainwater in lined ponds in the saline area of Bhal was tried out by the community with the help of two local organisations, Utthan and Mahiti. This resulted in a great success. The deepened village ponds were lined with low-density polyethylene to prevent saline groundwater from mixing with sweet rainwater runoff. A demand was put before the government to invest money in this people's alternative. The demand met with resistance from the government which said the water in such ponds would not be potable. The village men got frustrated and stopped pursuing the government. But then women started raising their voice, demanding acceptance and implementation of their alternative plans.

One saw an amazing conversion of frustration and anger into strong determination and assertion. In the face of patriarchal resistance, the women displayed increasing confidence in moving out of their houses and speaking out before the government. They challenged whatever and whoever came in their way. They challenged the moneylenders

and feudal lords who were running the water tankers and had a great stake in continuing the tanker-supplied water system that was resulting in a greater dependency of the communities on them. The women leaders also had to confront the deeply entrenched casteism. For them the struggle for access to reliable water systems became the means to bring all women on one platform, institutionalising strong norms against discrimination and inequality. Clearly, this struggle was much greater than just convincing the government. And finally, in 1987, the government gave funds for constructing eight lined ponds in eight villages of Bhal.

However, women's struggle was not over yet. The government engineers were furious when the pond locations identified as per their technical understanding were refused by the communities in each village. Women would, strategically, convince the engineers that from their experience the selected sites were not appropriate. But the major threat they faced was from their own community leaders who wanted to have the ponds near their farms so that they could use the water for agriculture. Women's groups collectively opposed that and selected sites that were closer to their homes, so that they could keep an eye on the ponds. This struggle took a real toll on women, testing their patience, strength and determination to have access to safe and reliable drinking water closer to where they lived.

Gujarat's coastal and tribal areas offer several examples of women from vulnerable and excluded communities showing active engagement and leadership in securing a water source close to their villages and communities. We have experienced women's strong engagement in trying out innovations and new ideas, such as lined ponds, sub-surface check dams and solar distillation rooftop water tanks. For example, Resham, Naathinen, Nassemben and many others from Dahod and Panchmahal districts of Gujarat, have been ardent promoters of groundwater recharging and decentralised water systems in the hilly regions. They have mobilised communities to share their private wells for the sake of "drinking water for all".

Remarkably, women added yet another dimension to their struggle for

water. After the outbreak of violent pogroms against Muslim communities in 2002, resulting in instigated divides between the Hindu and Muslim communities, women leaders in Panchmahal organised women from diverse communities around water issues, bridging the divides by addressing common needs. This became a good strategy for peace-building.

Why are women so passionately engaged in the struggle for accessing water? Is it due to their “intrinsic role” as water providers in the family resulting from patriarchal social systems or is it because women see water as a means to fight injustice and inequality and have a better understanding of the issue, socially and politically? It is certainly both. Women’s relationship with water goes beyond meeting essential needs to moving towards the larger empowerment agenda, taking the advantage of their close association with water. Jashoda and Baluben, two strong leaders from Bhal and Bhavnagar villages, always said that in comparison to men, women have a stronger memory of their early survival in the water in the wombs. This, plus their conventional responsibility for water, is what unleashes this powerful energy of women to struggle against all odds and strive for empowerment.

Nafisa Barot is a founder-member of Utthan, an NGO in Gujarat that has a vast experience of mobilising women for water harvesting

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