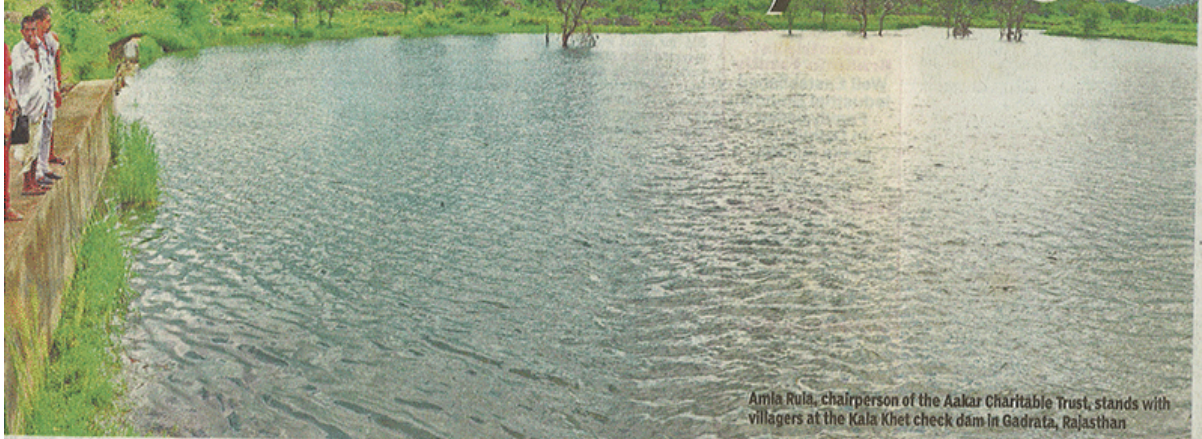


WATER IDEA, SIR JI!



Amla Ruia, chairperson of the Aakar Charitable Trust, stands with villagers at the Kala Khet check dam in Gadra, Rajasthan

uated in the middle of
agement? They build
indo Dey travelled to
rural Rajasthan to see
magically transformed
ught-proof economies

hills used to collect in the area but
flowed out. So while crops would get
a temporary water supply, there was
no water left for irrigation for the rest
of the year. Whenever rains proved
elusive, a poor crop of bajra was all
the villagers would get. But now, the
check dam holds enough water for
years. The village has literally be-
come drought proof. Even if there are
no rains for 10 years there will be
enough water," says Amla Ruia,
chairperson of the Aakar Charitable
Trust, which initiated the check dam
construction, changing the fortunes
of the 250 families in four villages
around Gadra forever. The project
is a Times Foundation initiative.

Ruia explained her group's modus
operandi. "As soon as the villagers
agree to contribute and are willing to
commence work, we give them the
nod without waiting for a sponsor.
Hence we need to have funds up-front.
At this moment we have 20 construc-
tions underway. As and when donors
come forward, we have their names
installed on name plates," she says.

"Our work stands apart from
other initiatives as here the benefi-
ciary society itself contributes almost
30-40% of the funds. This kind of in-
volvement empowers them and gives
them a true sense of ownership,



Amla Ruia at the Bheetkali Ka check dam. Ruia's check dam initiatives have helped recharge the water table and bring prosperity to the farmers

which in turn, makes our work sus-
tainable and long lasting," she adds.

In four years, the trust has built
123 check dams at a cost of Rs 5 crore
in various villages spread across the
districts of Dausa, Alwar, Sikar and
Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan and in Jalna
and Aurangabad in Maharashtra. Of
this, the contribution from the trust
has been around Rs 3.5 crore while
the villages have chipped in with Rs
1.5 crore. After the check dams were
built, the total returns from the 2012
winter crop stood at nearly Rs 71.5
crore.

"An expense of Rs 5 crore has
given a return of Rs 71.5 crore, which
amounts to almost 750%. And this
will be repeated for generations to
come," says an exultant Ruia.

In Gadra, no sooner was the
check dam built, the groundwater got
recharged and yields from farms mul-
tiplied. New crops of tomatoes, on-
ions and carrots, which no one had
touched in years due to lack of water,
were sown and the area under wheat

and mustard cultivation multiplied
manifold.

The prosperity of the village is
loud and clear. A couple of years back
two youngsters, Ram Nivas and Ra-
jender, made the village proud by get-
ting into the Army. There are some
who are pursuing nursing degrees
from Bangalore.

To top it all, villagers are now
even splurging on weddings. "Now,
we make at least two kinds of sweets,
hire generator sets, and even set up
a stage during weddings. Earlier, two
old men would just hold a kerosene
lamp as the bride and groom got mar-
ried on a mattress set up on the
floor," says Bhagirath who has just
bought two buffaloes and a motor-
bike. "Now, we can afford to allow
our children to pursue higher educa-
tion and not force them to do petty
jobs for a livelihood."

Along with prosperity, there is the
will to live a better, cleaner life. One
of these changes includes banning
alcohol. "We have all given up alcohol.

WHY CHECK DAMS

▶ These structures involve small masonry construction and extensive earthen bunds

▶ They are most effective in hilly terrain where the whole range can be used as catchment for the reservoir

▶ They have all the advantages of the large dams and none of the disadvantages such as rehabilitation of people, unutilized dead storage of water, waterlogging, risk of breach causing extensive damage

▶ They are cost effective and bestow tremendous bounty

"You will not find any shop selling liquor within a distance of 3 km of this village," says Sona Ram, a villager.

With such positive results it was perhaps natural for Ruia to embark on a mission of helping more and more villages with such water harvesting structures.

"After a couple of check dams, there was no looking back. It has completely changed the environment and economy in these villages.

"The streams have become perennial, the aquifers are full and at some places springs have sprouted. The character of water is such that it is all-pervasive and leaves no one out. Water combined with the perseverance of the beneficiary society and generosity of philanthropists can go a long way to alleviate the misery of villagers and give mother earth the most needed natural element in abundance," Ruia says.

(To join this cause you may write to timesfoundation@timesgroup.com)