



10.  
*GOONJ*  
*Taking Collective Responsibility..*  
*A lesson learnt from the 'so-called beneficiaries'*



These are ironic times that we live in... on the one hand, the country grapples with massive flooding in some states and on the other hand several other states reel under severe drought. Farmers are driven to commit suicide in many regions due to lack of water, failed crops and the burden of unpaid debts.

The tribal communities, traditionally considered the 'receivers' and 'beneficiaries', have been a constant source of wisdom and a wellspring of courage and determination in our work. Here is an inspiring story from the remote interiors of tribal India that shows how they took collective responsibility to find solutions for their problems.

Back in 2012, a few tribal *Korku* women from *Langoti* village in *Khalwa* block (*Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh*) had enough of making umpteen requests to the local administration to get water in their village. Summer meant no water here, as the common sources of



water dried up and the women had to walk to the lone well outside the village to fetch water 2 or 3 times a day in the scorching heat. Since the menfolk went out to work during the day, this distressing and arduous task of carrying up to 3 vessels of water on their heads and balanced on their waists, fell on the women of the house.

*Tulsi Bai*, from the village, said, "Even in the scorching summer heat, at noon we have gone to fetch water." Although there are 12 hand-



pumps and two tube wells (private) in the entire village..in summers all water sources dry up, except for this well that serves around 2000 villagers living in the vicinity.

*Ram Kali Bai* from the village said, *"When we went with our problem to the CO (Collector officer) of our block, we were told that there are 12 hand pumps and a tube well in your village, there is even a river and a dam, so what's your problem?"* She asked the officials to visit the village personally to understand the reality for themselves. This was in April 2012.

Something extraordinary was about to happen. Goonj had been working extensively in this region for some time and had already triggered the first well-digging under *'Cloth for Work' (CFW)* in the nearby *Salidhana* village. When the idea reached this village, the women of *Langoti* knew what they wanted to do. Like *Ram Kali Bai*, they realised that now it was really up to them to take a strong decisive step to solve their problem.

These women came together [now a Self-Help Group (SHG) called *USHA*] and decided to dig a well for themselves. The work began with 17 women and at the end of it 30 women along with some concerned men joined in to dig the well. *Ram Kali Bai* and *Ganga Bai* gave the land pro bono. Soon the digging started with *'Pediya'* which is an age-old traditional way of spotting water below ground using a coconut.

Digging was a tough and tedious job on the rocky ground but blasting wasn't possible as there were houses all around. The women started by using basic hand tools such as chisels and hammers. They worked diligently for a few hours every day to dig the well.

*"In the beginning, there were many who mocked and ridiculed them but gradually the observers watched silently."* says *Seema Prakash*





Founder of 'Spandan Samaj Sewa Samiti', Goonj's implementing partner organisation in Madhya Pradesh says that it took a lot to keep up their motivation.

*"We kept on digging and sometimes we would hit a big rock."* said a participant. The will to improve their own situation and the desperate need for water kept the women working doggedly every day. Under Goonj's CFW initiative they were given the basics- clothes, footwear and ration (rice, pulses, etc.) At last, they found water. The well they dug was 20-22 ft deep with approx. 22ft of circumference.

This journey of hardships, challenge and opposition from the local and district level authorities was not a smooth one by any stretch of



© GOONJ





the imagination. The big relief was that now there was water within their reach. “पानी निकल गया तो मज़ा आ गया” (when we found water, that was the best thing) said *Tulsi Bai*, one of the few committed ladies who did the back-breaking work to make this happen.

The well in *Langoti* now serves this *tola* (hamlet) of 250-300 people of the *Langoti* village for all their various needs. It was truly humbling and inspiring to see this local citizen action initiative. The well was later cemented using funds by the organisation and money collected from the *SHG* group of the village.

*This experience is perhaps another reminder for us to remove the demeaning words such as 'donor' and 'beneficiary' from our language. It is time to listen more closely and give more value to the 'will' and 'wisdom' of the grassroots*

\*\*\*\*\*



## UPDATE FOOTNOTE

In rural India, the well-being of women is intricately tied to the availability of water as they often bear the brunt of the escalating water crisis, experiencing challenges brought about by both floods and drought. Goonj has been deeply involved in standing with rural communities, particularly tribal communities, in addressing this issue. We have been focussing on enhancing rural India's access to water through hyper local collaborative efforts, involving the repair, revival, and construction of community water assets such as ponds, wells, etc. Over the past nine years (FY 2014-2023), our teams have undertaken more than **1,300** wells-related projects in tandem with rural communities by mobilising, motivating, and empowering them to value and use their own efforts, wisdom and resources.