

## How a Check Dam Transformed Rural Livelihoods in Rajasthan

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*Sajjangarh block in Banswara district of Rajasthan is a region where the majority of the population belongs to tribal communities. The people here live scattered across hills and hamlets, with neither adequate irrigation facilities nor any stable means of livelihood. Most families in this area depend on rain-fed agriculture and daily wage labour for their survival. When the rains fail or crops are lost, entire families migrate to cities like Ahmedabad to find work in construction. This migration sometimes stretches to more than six months out of 12. Its deepest toll falls on women's health, children's education, and the social fabric of the family. Climate change has only sharpened these hardships.*

It is against this difficult backdrop that Dayabai Motilal Dodiya lives in the village of Bijalpura. Forty-six years old and part of a family of five, she owns eight bighas of agricultural land yet because farming here depends entirely on rainfall, only a single crop could be grown each year. For the rest of the year, migrating to Ahmedabad with her family for wage work was an inescapable reality. Near Dayabai's field, the Gram Panchayat of Godawada Narang had constructed a check dam back in 2013. But more than a decade had passed, and silt had accumulated to the point where the structure was entirely non-functional. It still stood there, but no water was retained and no benefit reached the fields. The farms of other members of the Saksham group Binubai Dodiya, Hira Dodiya, Radhika Dodiya, Meera Dodiya, Sangeeta Dodiya, Rajkumari Dodiya, Manjula Dodiya, Kali Dodiya, Lakshmi Dodiya, Shila Dodiya, Devli Dodiya, and Sita Dodiya also adjoined this same check dam. For all of them, that crumbling structure was a shared problem, and yet no one had ever made an effort to find a solution.



During this same period, Vaagdhara in collaboration with Hindustan Unilever Foundation, was working in the area on sustainable agriculture and the efficient use of water. Through Gram Swaraj groups, Saksham groups, and Bal Swaraj groups, regular training sessions and meetings were held to make communities self-reliant in matters of water, forests, land, livestock, and seeds. Community facilitators at these gatherings encouraged people to

return to nature and tradition. From 2023 onwards, the programme began a focused dialogue on the construction, repair, and sustainable management of water conservation structures, and awareness around water gradually deepened within the community. During one such meeting of the Bijalpura Gram Swaraj group, deliberations were underway on water conservation and the repair of water structures. Dayabai was present and listening carefully to everything being discussed. When the conversation turned to the water structures in their area, the memory of that long-dormant check dam came to her mind. She thought that if the check dam could be deepened, not only her field but all the surrounding farmers could receive water.

Dayabai first discussed this idea with her Saksham group companions Binubai, Hira, Radhika, and Meera. All agreed unanimously that the proposal should be placed before the Gram Swaraj group meeting. When Dayabai and her colleagues presented the proposal for deepening the check dam at the Gram Swaraj meeting, everyone gave their consent. After collective deliberation, a formal proposal was prepared in the name of Gram Panchayat Godawada Narang, and submitted by Dayabai and the Saksham group members at the Gram Sabha under the oversight of the Gram Swaraj group. The Gram Panchayat accepted the proposal, and the work of deepening the check dam was sanctioned under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Once work began, members from approximately 70 surrounding families worked shoulder to shoulder. The effort continued for two months, and throughout this period Dayabai, Binubai, Hira, Radhika, and Meera played a particularly significant role from providing water to laborers to actively participating in cleaning and pitching work through the collective tradition of Halma. Halma is the tribal practice of communal voluntary labour, in which the entire community unites for a common purpose. This ancient tradition answered a modern need, and the whole community came together with a renewed sense of hope.

When the deepening of the check dam was complete and the rains came, water began to collect and in that gathered water, these women saw their own future. They resolved that this time, there would be no migration. This time, they would stay home and cultivate their own land. That single decision changed everything. Across 62 bighas of farmland connected to the check dam, 14 farmers sowed Rabi crops. Chickpeas, wheat, maize, and pigeon peas began to thrive a satisfaction that no wage labour could ever offer.

The impact of water being retained in the check dam was not confined to the fields alone. The groundwater level in nearby wells, hand pumps, and bore wells improved. The area under irrigation expanded, and with it came relief in animal husbandry as well, since livestock no longer had to travel far for water. During the deepening work, approximately seventy neighboring families received continuous employment for two months, generating around 2,200 person-days of work. The efforts of Dayabai and the other women demonstrate that when women learn to raise their voice, and when traditional knowledge meets modern schemes, change is certain to follow. Today, Dayabai is no longer confined to the limits of her home. She regularly reaches out to other women to strengthen the Saksham group and educates her community about the importance of water, land, forests, livestock, and native seeds. Her husband and other family members, who had earlier migrated for more than six months at a stretch, now farm their own land and live together as a family. Only an empowered community can lay the foundation for its own secure future.

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