

India | March 2016



**Top:** Amraram

**Below:** Water management through waste weir



While the month of March signifies the end of the financial year for many of us, the United Nation dedicates this month to two very important issues– Women and Water. International Women's Day observed on March 8<sup>th</sup>, applauds and acknowledges women's achievements from all parts of the globe; and March 22<sup>nd</sup> is observed as World Water Day advocating sustainable management of freshwater resources.

It is quite interesting and a matter of great pride that Ambuja Cement Foundation (ACF) has made significant contribution in both these areas. Today, ACF is closely working with approximately 16000 rural women through SHGs and Federations. On the other hand, our rigorous efforts in water conservation and management has played a crucial role in making Ambuja Cement, a four times water positive company.

This issue covers stories to showcase how ACF is impacting lives by working in these areas.

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### ***Water Management for better livelihood***

Amraram is a small farmer from Patan village in Jaitaran block of Pali district. This small village is situated in the semi-arid region of western Rajasthan that faces unpredictable rainfall leading to either flooding or draught.

Before approaching ACF, Amraram and his brothers had to incur huge losses due to erratic rainfall. During floods, the fertile soil was washed away, adversely impacting agricultural yield. On the other hand the absence of sufficient rainfall caused serious dearth of irrigation water.

In one of the meetings of the Village Development Committee (VDC), Amraram shared his problem with the ACF team. The team visited his farm, which was gradually turning into a barren land due to inconsistent irrigation. ACF noticed that the fields were located in the course of river Leelri. During floods, the uncontrolled river flow washed away the

soil, thereby leaching all its nutrients. In the following meeting, ACF proposed the construction of a waste weir in Amraram's farm, which was soon approved by the VDC. Total expense for weir construction was approximately 2 lakh which was borne by ACF and Amraram in the ratio 70:30.

With the support of ACF, Amraram constructed a waste weir in his farm that effectively stopped soil erosion and also helped in recharging the ground water table thus improving soil fertility. Amraram, who could only grow seasonal crops earlier, has moved to three crops in a year. His average annual income has moved up from 70,000 per year to 2.5 lakh per year. Amraram's story exhibits how crucial water is to our livelihood. If left unmanaged water could easily turn from a boon to bane and with little management, can turn from bane to boon.

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## **Strong Women, Stronger Society**

ACF, through its women empowerment programme, encourages women to step out of their households and become decision makers, engage in savings and income generation activities, support and shrug off shackles by society.

ACF believes that financial independence is the first step in the journey of empowerment. Women feel thrilled to play important roles in household decision making such as, sending their children to school or purchasing gifts for a festival or marriage, building a toilet. Today, we are reaching out to approximately 16000 women through 1322 SHGs who have created a corpus of more than Rs. 5.4 crore across all locations.

With improved skills in handling finances, women demonstrate an impressive lift in their self-respect and confidence. This is when ACF encourages them to participate in different community development programmes.

In Chandrapur and Kodinar, Women's Federations have played an instrumental role in encouraging people to construct toilets in their households. The two Federations, with 435 SHGs and over 4800 members are driving communities to adopt hygienic practices. Loans applied for toilet construction are given prime importance and disbursed on priority.

*Sorath Mahila Vikas Sahkari Mandal* (Women's Federation in Kodinar) has initiated a unique social protection programme for young widows. In rural areas widows are ill-treated and discriminated in the society and are forced to abide by strict and irrational norms, which often makes them feel insecure and vulnerable. Under the social protection programme, women

condemn the practice of societal discrimination imposed on widows and encourage them to dress up, wear make-up and jewellery just like any other married woman. The Federation also lends financial support to widows.

There are many such powerful examples of how ACF is working with women in the community. The outcomes are heartening! Today these women stand in unison and protest against social stereotyping and violence at domestic and societal level. In a society where gender inequality persists as a bitter reality, such courageous acts from rural women, especially from the weaker sections, is a commendable progress.

As more and more women are associating with Ambuja, the entire programme is set on a path for social evolution. Women SHGs are independently handling entrepreneurial activities, creating market linkages and business collaborations. In Darlaghat (Himachal Pradesh), women have started cultivating and selling mushrooms, while in Ropar (Punjab) hosiery is bringing cash in their coffers.

The most important aspect of the initiative is that women have come to find solace in each other's company. They protect and encourage each other and solve their problems collectively. As they progress together, they are silently breaking barriers of social taboos and discrimination.

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**Top:** Women's meeting in Kodinar

**Below:** Women entrepreneurs at Ropar making hosiery products



**Energise. Involve. Enable.**