

# Success Story

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## The Water Cup by Paani Foundation

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### Motivating Villagers to Conserve and Harvest Water through A Contest

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### Introduction

Till 2015 summer, Jaigaon, like Nigadi, was gripped with water scarcity. But, rather than waiting for the situation to get worse, its residents adopted watershed management works. Till 2015, Jaigaon was a well-known tanker village and the villagers used to regularly hear stories of fights over water among its residents. But a year later villagers did *shramdan* (voluntary labour) to carry out watershed works. This year, even in peak summer months, Jaigaon has 24x7 water available in all its wells. Villagers were amazed at its transformation.

The families of Nigadi are confident that if Jaigaon could drought-proof itself through watershed management, so can they. Since early April, Nigadi residents are daily doing *shramdan* to create rainwater-harvesting structures to end their water woes. By the end of April, its residents had already completed 2,200 cubic metres of continuous contour trenches, and planned to finish 7,200 cubic metres before the arrival of the Southwest monsoon. Continuous contour trenches help in breaking down the speed of flowing water and recharge the groundwater.

### The Paani Foundation:

The idea for foundation and contest followed from the television show named “*Satyamev Jayate*”, which ran from 2012 to 2014. The team looked for a meaningful cause they could stay with for a number of years. Satyajit Bhatkal and Kiran Rao decided to work on water, something very fundamental to all of us, and in Maharashtra every year there’s a drought.

They invested a year in research, understanding the problem and possible solutions. When they were ready, Khan, Rao, Bhatkal, and others from the *Satyamev Jayate* crew started a non-profit, Paani Foundation, which would spread knowledge of watershed management and groundwater replenishment.

The team designed a syllabus and training methods, mostly experiential learning and games and then trained trainers. Villages invited must pass a Gram Sabha resolution saying they want to participate, and send five people to centres in their talukas for short training stints. They asked them to send at least two women. They learned about water conservation principles and watershed management structures like contour trenches, earthen dams, and soak pits, then went back to their villages and lead the work, which involved all the villagers pitching in volunteer (*shramdaan*) work. They executed their plans in the months before the monsoon, with their success measured after the rains.

Roughly 150 of Maharashtra’s 358 talukas are in drought areas. In 2016, the Cup began small, testing the idea in three talukas, with around 116 villages. In 2017, they scaled up to 30 talukas and a little over 1,300 villages. This year, it’s 75 talukas and over 4,000 villages.

Following points are remarkable about Paani Foundation.

1. Its sheer smallness contrasted with the grandness of its vision
2. Each of the foundation's promoters could have basked in their glory and issued a responsibility-abdicating statement that they were engaged in enhancing urban awareness for a water conservation problem affecting the rural millions; they selected to put their hands in the bucket instead.
3. The foundation advocated that the trick was not in addressing this problem outside-in but to inspire the rural folk to recognise the problem, find the land, money, know-how, hands and resource to harvest their own water.
4. The foundation motivated, trained and educated a complete solution. For instance, the foundation invested in mass and digital media to educate through entertainment; it trained (technical and leadership) five persons per village, entailing coverage of 150,000 persons across 30,000 drought-vulnerable Maharashtra villages; it created a digital platform that comprised technical information on the one hand while accessing crowd-sourced funds, government support and volunteers on the other. The result is that the rural folk, who considered walking miles for water as part of their destiny, now, consider it important to measure rain in millimetres.
5. The foundation did not just preach the message; it transformed the exercise into a game (first prize Rs 50 lakhs, second prize Rs 30 lakhs and third prize Rs 20 lakhs), starting with 116 villages of three talukas - Koregaon (Satara district), Ambajogai (Beed district) and Warud (Amravati district). The four-day residential training camps comprised five villagers (including two women) per village; about 800 villagers were trained in watershed development. Six, the results have begun to show: in the Satyamev Jayate Water Cup competition, nearly 4,203 villagers completed Rs 91 lacs of projects across a month-and-a-half in Ambajogai taluka.

## The Water Cup

At sunrise every day, across 13 districts in Maharashtra, thousands of villagers set out to dig trenches and build earthen dams. This has been their early morning routine for the past 45 days. From able-bodied men and women to little boys in shorts and frail grandfathers, everybody chips in. There is no time to be lost because they are getting ready for the monsoon and the second round of the Satyamev Jayate Water Cup, which offers cash awards for villages in Maharashtra that drought-proof their settlements.

The cash awards are just an incentive. Water harvesting and watershed management come with serious benefits that transform the lives of farming communities which have been haunted by drought — often despite receiving some rain.

This year, parched villages hope to catch as much rain as possible and put it back into the earth — thereby reviving the water cycle that can sustain farming. It is a desperate effort by villagers to save themselves from the chronic drought which has wracked their lives.

The Satyamev Jayate Water Cup gives the top three villages Rs 50 lakh, Rs 30 lakh and Rs 20 lakh, respectively. There is also a prize for sustainability. Started two years ago by actor Aamir

Khan and his wife, film producer Kiran Rao, the Paani Foundation has one ambitious objective — to drought-proof Maharashtra.

Dr Avinash Pol, a dentist, now popularly known as the '*paanyache* (water) doctor', is the foundation's inspiration and helps guide its policies and programmes. From the historic Ajinkyatara Fort, Dr Pol began a *shramdaan* or voluntary work initiative to restore water levels in Satara town and showed the difference this could make across the district (see *Civil Society*, August 2016).

For the Water Cup, villages are assessed on watershed management and water conservation works. Last year, 116 villages entered the competition. This year, as word spread, around 1,300 villages from 13 districts in Vidarbha, Marathawada and western Maharashtra are competing.

In 2016 Velu village won the Satyamev Jayate Water Cup. Before the monsoon broke the villagers had worked hard to drought-proof their village. Then, in June, it rained. Just 275 mm. It was enough for the village to say goodbye to water tankers. After 20 years.

The *rabi* crop was good too. Each of the 350 families in the village harvested five to eight quintals of grain, says Duryodhan Panduranga Nanavare, 63, one of Velu's trainers who learnt to catch the rain from Paani Foundation last year.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, who gave away the prizes on Independence Day, added another Rs 20 lakh to the Rs 50 lakh that Velu village won. Another foundation put in an additional Rs 5 lakh.

"Eighty percent of the villages that participated in last year's competition bid goodbye to the water tankers they had been dependent on for years," says Dr Pol.

Last year, water harvesting and watershed management carried out across villages made it possible to save more than a billion litres of water, which would otherwise have arrived in 1.3 million tanker loads. And Rs 272 crore worth of water is now being annually conserved, according to estimates by the Paani Foundation.

It isn't easy to get people to work together shoulder to shoulder and realise that the solution to their problem lies in their own hands. Social mobilisation is the lynchpin of success. But when the rains fail, crops fail and the only solution people can think of is to migrate to the city.

## The strategy

The Paani Foundation has worked out a very careful strategy to enthruse half-abandoned villages into battling drought. First of all, the foundation does not give a single rupee to any village, they give the knowledge instead.

Aamir Khan writes a personal letter to every gram panchayat, inviting the village to join the water competition. This year the deadline for applications was 31 January. Each competing village then sends five representatives, including two women, for training. A four-day residential training camp is organised. The five representatives return to their village and prepare an

extensive watershed development plan. They are also expected to mobilise people by organising gram sabhas to explain the competition and why everyone must get involved.



*A tank being readied for the monsoon*



*Results of last year's work: a shimmering stream and a pond brimming with water*

The Paani Foundation arms the representatives with solid technical resources. The Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR), based in Ahmednagar, is Paani Foundation's knowledge partner. WOTR has trained 40 Panlot Sevaks — barefoot watershed technicians — to provide field guidance to the foundation.

Three technical trainers are stationed in each taluk. After last year's competition, the Paani Foundation called for applications for the job of technical trainer. Out of 200 applicants, it selected 40.

Alongside, the Paani Foundation has produced over 130 educational videos on different soil and water structures, success stories, discussions and a fiction series on water. Its water heroes series has 25 inspiring success stories in Hindi and Marathi.

Villagers can see some of these videos by downloading Paani Foundation's app. During training, the five representatives are taught how to upload photos and file daily reports via the app.

Villagers can also ask Dr Pol for advice. He attends gram sabha meetings and interacts with thousands of villagers via satellite. During each episode a film or theatre personality joins the doctor. A caravan from village to village facilitates this online gram sabha. Aamir and Kiran take keen interest and visit villages from time to time.

*Shramdaan* is what brings people together. Once technical plans have been worked out, people voluntarily offer their labour. To avoid the scorching sun, *shramdaan* starts early in the morning. Volunteers do their quota of work and leave. But Paani Foundation's dedicated workers continue. They plan the next day's work, mark contour lines and send a report to the foundation's office for approval.

Forty-five days' *shramdaan* doesn't magically create the watershed and soil conservation work every village requires. Invariably, earth diggers have to be hired to dig deep continuous contour trenches, ponds and so on. The village can raise resources from government programmes such as MGNREGA, IWMP (Integrated Watershed Management Programme), trusts or individual donors.

## Village of onions

The revival of farms and villages depends on water. Take Bidal, the onion village in Satara district. For 17 years Bidal has been dependent on water tankers. The survival of its famed onion, the Pune Furusangi, was at stake.

Pune Furusangi is a tasty onion variety that can be stored for six months. About 10 onions make a kilo. Wholesale traders have settled in Bidal so that they can buy the Furusangi and sell it all over India.

Spread over 2,468 hectares, Bidal has a population of 5,974 and no water. The farmers here are hard-working and if they have water they produce a record crop. One example cited is of a 38-

year-old farmer, Bapurao Jagadale. He has 10 acres. Three years ago he grew onion all over his land and harvested 20 tonnes. That year, onion prices hit the roof. Jagadale earned a good profit.

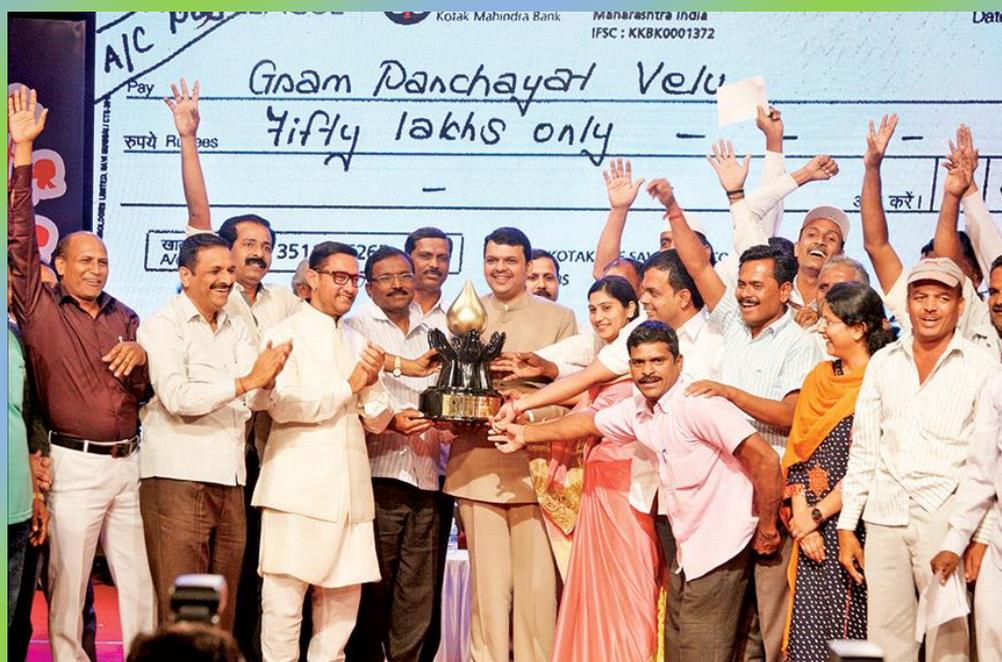
Bidal has 375 open wells. Due to persistent drought, farmers have been abandoning half-grown crops in their fields. Outside every house there is a drum for storing water from tankers. Each family is rationed 40 litres per day. Water is used very judiciously. Bath water flowing from the bathroom is collected in a basin and used for washing clothes.

After joining the competition for the Satyamev Jayate Water Cup, a wave of enthusiasm has swept the village. Over half its residents have done their bit for making water harvesting structures. Farmers expect to finish two years' work in 45 days and then supply water to other villages.

Bidal came to know of a village called Satara Road which had taken part in last year's water competition and built a range of soil and water conservation structures. An 80-member team from Bidal went on an exposure visit to study Satara Road's structures.

Like Paani Foundation, Bidal too announced a competition. The *basti* that did the most voluntary labour and built the best structures would get the first prize of Rs 50,000. Those coming second and third would get Rs 30,000 and Rs 20,000. An additional prize of Rs 11,000 was for the *basti* doing the best overall work.

The idea has caught on. Another village has announced prizes for water works too: the first prize is a fridge, the second a mixie and the third a fan! Like Bidal, about a dozen villages have shown great enthusiasm and made substantial progress in the competition.



*Devendra Fadnavis, Chief Minister of Maharashtra, and Aamir Khan at last year's Satyamev Jayate Water Cup award ceremony. Velu village won the first prize.*

## The people who join

The water movement has attracted diverse people: farmers, middle-class professionals, urban labour, the handicapped, etc. At the grassroots, it is providing technical expertise that converts into jobs. Old disputes in villages are getting resolved as people come together.

Satara's three taluks — Man, Khatav and Koregaon — are all starved of water. They get only 400 to 500 mm of rain. All the six villages were depended on tankers.

Nhavi Budruk is a tiny village in Khatav taluk, inhabited by 357 families. Voluntary labour has attracted around 1,000 people of all ages. The number keeps rising day by day.

Pune and Mumbai are close to these villages. Water scarcity has forced people to head for the city. Around 100 painting contractors in Mumbai are from Kumthe in Khatav taluk. Bhosre has 700 families and most work for meager salaries in Mumbai.

Kumthe has 147 open wells and 700 bore wells. For six years, water tankers have been doing the rounds. And since February, Kumthe gets water only on alternate days. All the villages in Khatav taluk are raising funds. Kumthe has started a WhatsApp group. They collected Rs 3 lakh. A team from Kumthe was getting ready to visit Mumbai because there has been a lot of migration there.

In Padali Station village there was a stalemate over construction of a road to the crematorium. The issue came up for discussion when the villagers had assembled for *shramdaan*. With a little effort by activists, the villagers who had been objecting to the road for years agreed to its construction and it was completed in three days.

The movement has snowballed. On 1 May, Maharashtra Day, organisers appealed to people to take part in a special *shramdaan* and 17,000 people from all walks of life, unconnected with the competing villages, took part.

## Conclusion

Several factors make Paani Foundation's work strikingly unique. First, it believes staunchly in community-based development and has designed programmes accordingly. Right knowledge and right action are motivating people. This knowledge, explained in simple terms, is understood and disseminated from village to village. Second, the foundation's strategy of empowering stakeholders with knowledge and motivation is more result-oriented than the subsidy and sops approach to development. It is likely to raise a non-political rural leadership that is badly needed. Such opportunities don't exist in the subsidy-sops system. Watershed development is continuous work. It can't be said that all villages will work enthusiastically. The percentage of work that is completed depends on their unity and tempo. The main difference in this work is that, unlike the government or the NGO sector, organizers aren't giving a single rupee to the villagers. Given the right chance, they believe our villagers can do their work by themselves.

## References / Videos

Further impact stories of Paani Foundation and Water Cup are available on:

<https://www.paanifoundation.in/impact-stories/videos/>

Official Android App of Paani Foundation is available to download on:

<https://www.paanifoundation.in/our-work/app/>

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.paanifoundation&hl=en>

The success stories, and case studies of Water Cup and Paani foundation are also available on the official Youtube channel of Paani Foundation:

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUmhrRevHylwk\\_pLfqwDr0Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUmhrRevHylwk_pLfqwDr0Q)