

# HUL greens barren village

*Creating effective water harvesting solutions help farmers sow crops throughout the year, reduce migration and raise per capita income*

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**F**or Bhairav Patil, a farmer in the hilly terrain of Parkhed village in the Vidarbha region, one crop per year was the maximum he could reap from his one acre of land. He would revel at the sight of the monsoons and also feel helpless as he would see the water run down the hill before he could do anything to store it for future use. Water harvesting was a solution an NGO, Maharashtra Institute of Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (MITTRA), knew, but did not have the capital to implement it. Hindustan Unilever (HUL), a fast moving consumer goods company having a soap factory in nearby village Khamgaon, had the capital and an inclination to help farmers near its factory to be financially independent. The cost of building one check dam is over Rs 1 lakh.

Explaining the nature of water scarcity in Vidarbha, District Collector, V Poreddiwar says: "Of the total rainfall here, about 55 per cent of rainfall is lost in evaporation and 35 per cent is wasted as water runs away downhill. Merely 10 per cent is ultimately used for irrigation or drinking purposes. In this scenario, a water harvesting model developed by HUL is expected to increase the water retention manifold."

Having implemented the project in Parkhed, HUL hopes to more than double the area of land under cultivation in Mandka, a nearby village with an initial investment of Rs 80 lakh. It aims to get nearly 125 hectares of land owned by the farmers of Mandka under regular cultivation. It will first work on a demonstration land of 569 acres with a set of farmers to convince rest of them in Mandka of this model's utility.

The model has to be built on the hilly terrain in Mandka region, which has wide variations in elevation, slope lengths and a fragile geological formation. When the water flows away down the hill, it triggers multiple problems like loss of vegetation, lack of fodder for



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cattle and soil erosion. The water harvesting model devised by HUL consists of building trenches and gullies, constructing check dams and wells and planting a selection of tree species that would arrest water before it flows away. Narrow excavations of about 0.3 metres wide and 0.6 metres long are made along the contours after furrowing the land. The available rubble is used for bunding. Agave/vetiver grass is planted to reduce run-off and conserve soil. Where there are no debris, trench-cum-mounds are constructed to arrest surface water run-off. Three check bunds and six gully plugs are also constructed on the small nallahs running through the plot.

The company has taken this project to Mandka after its experiment in Parkhed. Says Patil, a beneficiary: "I could sow only one crop on my one-acre of

land. Now, my total crop harvest has gone up to 5 acres as I can grow crop in other seasons.

**In Parkhed, between 2003 and 2007, Hindustan Unilever has built 1,600 trenches, 7,500 pits, 5 permanent check dams and 3 wells at a cost of over Rs 50 lakh**

The farmers, here, could grow only cotton, wheat and gram. Availability of water has helped us to grow vegetables like onions and fruits like papaya."

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5 permanent check dams and 3 wells for a total expense of over Rs 50 lakh.

According to MITTRA officials, about 2,000 people, including 120 landless farmers, have benefited from this programme and their income has gone up by three times. The cost of treating the plot was about Rs 6,000 to Rs 8,000 per hectare of land. The company also assisted women in forming about 32 self help groups (SHGs) which have collected a total savings of Rs 3.52 lakh and helped local schools to give computer training. The migration from this village, the company says, has reduced, with 99 per cent of the population wanting to stay back after the success of the project.

Meeta Singh, head, corporate social responsibility, lays out the structure of each CSR programme which is later implemented by the company's

CSR team and local factory officials. About 'Greening Barrens', Singh said "We developed this programme according to the needs of the people here. Although we have other CSR projects running, like Shakti, we realised that implementing a pan-India programme would not make sense as every region has different needs."

HUL would now withdraw from Parkhed and focus on Mandka. In Parkhed, the company has also mobilised the farmers to build a community where farmers pool a part of their income. This fund is at the disposal of farmers to use it for repair work of existing dams. Although, some incidents of farmer suicides have been found in these villages in the last few years, they were attributed to heavy debt and not directly linked to lack of rainfall, say farmers of the village.