

BLOOMING RESERVOIR



paani gaon mein rahna chahiye (Every drop of water should remain in the field; every drop should be retained in village)," said Bhagwat Prasad as a family of stork flew around the reservoir.

The contrast in sight was unimaginable. Just three kms from here, there was a mad rush for water in Guraula village where man and animal had assembled at the village well to quench their thirst. The water was black and dirty. Oblivious to its colour, the women were scooping water out of the well with the help of buckets at a frantic pace because the level of water had gone down drastically within just a few hours. Duashia, the Pradhan in that village said that there were 11 hand pumps in the village and

etables are not home-grown, vegetables come from nearby districts of Allahabad in UP or Satna in Madhya Pradesh and the prices of vegetables are exorbitantly high.

Bhai Lal grew vegetables around that reservoir for the first time this year. He grew lady fingers, pumpkins, onions and even bitter gourd. "I had a bumper crop of onion and lady fingers. I have so far sold 40 kg of lady fingers and still my plants are laden with 'bhindi'. In a rough estimate, I have grown over 100 kg of onion," Bhai Lal said grinning ear to ear.

There was a spark in the eyes of Bhai Lal, and this glitter was the 'dream' Bhagwat Prasad was talking about and how the reservoir has helped in har-

water to flow slowly than to run," Prasad said. "The cornerstone of the strategy is to develop and manage rain water to maximum extent possible to produce biomass," he said.

The bulk of the monsoon rains fall in short intense spells, often separated by several weeks and days, allowing very little time to the rain water to penetrate the soil. Therefore, much of the rainwater runs away and only a fraction is available locally to produce biomass.

Unfortunately, watershed programmes, meant for development of rain-fed regions like Bundelkhand tends to focus only on conservation of soil and rain water through, what is called safe disposal of rainwater thus, ignoring the

watershed approach because rain water moves along the natural drainage of a watershed," Prasad said. "Leveling and terracing land, making field bunds impounding rainwater in each farmland and picking up an appropriate crop are some of the techniques used by farmers depending on the specific terrains, specially soil and slope," he said.

With water around, can prosperity be far behind? The villagers grew 5429 trees of different varieties including amla, neem, mango and babul. Over 3000 survived. The farmers were asked to preserve and regenerate vegetation. They were also asked to adopt new agricultural practices.

"A beginning has been made on a

HARVESTING A DREAM IN PARCHED TERRITORY

Contrary to its dominant image of being parched and unyielding, pockets in Bundelkhand are responding to specific water projects

Biswajeet Banerjee / Manikpur (Chitrakoot)



AS AN old folk tale has it, a woman in this god forsaken area would rather prefer safety for the pitcher in which she is carrying water instead of the life of her most precious ones. Driving down the parched Bundelkhand belt in the scorching summer, it is obvious that the dark brown land is devoid of greenery and is splattered with the ubiquitous daily struggle for water. Coloured jerry-cans with clear markings placed near hand pumps in a queue testify to the long wait for water. Women and children carrying earthen pitchers filled with water over their heads show how precious water is in this rugged badland known more for starvation, deprivation and poverty.

No wonder then that people come to blows for even a glass of water, and

there are times when the scuffle can become lethal.

As if to prove that the obverse is also true, the continuous view of this dusty terrain is broken by an oasis of water where even storks love to tread. A family of storks numbering over a dozen hovers over a vast reservoir of water which spreads across the Mangawan village in Manikpur block of Chitrakoot. The precious water in abundance in this otherwise parched region is no less than magic.

"We are harvesting a dream ... a dream to retain every drop of the rain water so that this precious water could be used for sustaining life and prosperity in this region," Bhagwat Prasad, director of the Akhil Bhartiya Samaj Sewa Sansthan - ABSSS - said.

Prasad said, the motive of the watershed project is simple: rain water should be retained in such a way that it should remain in fields from one monsoon to the other. "The water in the farmland should not wash down and go waste. *Khet ka paani khet mein aur gaon ka*

all were working, but the commotion in and around the well belied his claims.

And just a few kms from that commotion was a tranquil reservoir of water which had given hope to the villagers living around. The reservoir was a result of a watershed project which started two years back and now has become the life line. The rain water was stopped with the help of check dams and bunds at different places. The rain water was allowed to trickle down instead of running off the surface.

"This simple principle has two positive effects - one, this reservoir which still has water despite it being the start of June and too many wells around this reservoir have abundance of drinking water. This area has no scarcity of water. We have enough water to grow even vegetables," Prasad said.

Growing vegetables is a costly proposition in this rugged region. The farmers generally grow wheat and oilseeds but have never grown vegetables because of lack of irrigation facilities. And as veg-

nessing the dreams of the poor villagers. The land around the reservoir was converted into farmland. Small dark brown stalks suggest wheat was grown in that area. "Cropping was not possible here mainly because the region does not have enough water. Now, we have transformed the rugged region into a green patch of land," Bhagwat Prasad said.

Deriving its name from Bundela kings of latter medieval period, Bundelkhand includes several southern districts of Uttar Pradesh. Once known for the valour of its Rajput kings and a glorious culture immortalised in the Khajuraho temple, it now conjures images of poverty, lawlessness, ecological degradation and government neglect. Agriculture is the main occupation and is mainly rain-fed with low productivity and high uncertainty.

"The key is to make rain water travel through the land rather than over it. In other words, the aim is to allow the rain



productive use of the rainwater locally. Safe disposal is generally achieved by impounding the rainwater runoff by constructing check dams and ponds at discreet location at watershed.

"An alternative conception is to arrest the rain water as far as possible close to the plants that need it, while following a

positive note. May be, in coming years, we would be able to expand our reservoir which would hold more water. This might help in bringing prosperity in the lives of these poor people," he said - or was it another brave 'dream' which might usher in a new era in this parched land. ■