

DHAN FOUNDATION'S EXPERIENCES ON EFFICIENT TANK IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT THROUGH TRADITIONAL WATER MANAGERS IN SOUTH INDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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The rural water managers are important and play a critical role in the local management of tank resources. Neerkattis, these water managers are called, help running these important systems for the wellbeing of the people and villages. These managers who work in almost all the tanks make their livelihood based on providing their services like water of crops in rotation basis, protecting the tanks and its recourses, mobilizers of the local communities and general village workers. Over the time, like any other rural institution, the tank as an institution has also changed a lot, and profiles of these managers have also changed. In many cases such changes have played havoc with their lives, but still many are thriving by adapting themselves to the changes. In a way, their lives are parallel to the performances of their tanks.

The Water managers (Neerkatti) act as watchman of the tank against natural calamities like breaching due to floods and collapsing sluices and weirs due to wear and tear. Water management of the functions in tank system vary depending on the availability of water in tank storage, type and extent of crops, class of farmers and set of practices in the ayacut areas. While farmers are kept away from the irrigating on their own, Neerkattis ensures the water supply to every field in rotation. Strict rules for the purposes of irrigation regulation existed in all the tanks. Neerkattis are the only persons allowed to open and close the sluice outlets and regulate the flow of water to the fields and the farmers do not generally interfere.

The Neerkattis restrict the number of wettings as decided by the farmers collectively taking care to prevent the crop losses by providing the threshold level of supply. This is an optimization techniques learned over a period of experiences by the committees to get optimum yields.

In case the restriction of irrigated area becomes necessary to use the water most efficiently, the area will be reduced. There are several ways by which this reduction is done. Usually a uniform area per family is fixed and limited area close to the head reach is selected and all the farmers are assured water for piece of land for cultivation.

On-farm management related to irrigation of crops in the ayacut area is left to the Neerkattis. The farmers are not allowed to attend the irrigation functions. The Neerkattis are also expected to report to the farmers on the crop diseases and pests for taking up timely control measures.

The following are the practical answers from the DHAN Foundation's last twenty years of experiences with the tank rehabilitation and revival of Neerkattis system in the tanks in South India.

- Farmers should not attend to their water management functions. They should abstain from the tank bund and leave the tank to the Neerkattis and the local village tank associations.
- This would mean that a new management regime, restrained behavior, collective action and an individual responsibility to safeguard common property would emerge. It also means that the farmers have to be taught to get together and respect the need for a management order and manager who can run the business based on consensus.
- Local illness to be cured. The encroachments on tank bunds, feeder channels, surplus courses and tank beds to be evicted locally. This would mean that the farmers have to collectively restrain themselves from indulging in free for all and vacate the encroachments for the better performance of tanks.
- Every tank should have an organization with irrigating farmers as the core and others users surrounded.
- Every tank should be revived, its structure be recreated to its full strength.

This means that the governments should liberalize the tanks and hand them over to the village associations for better management where in Neerkattis play a critical role as an efficient water manager.