

Neerkattis

The Story of India's traditional water managers



'I am the *neerkatti* of the Chinnakachikunta tank of Marlapalle village,' says a proud Anjeppa from a remote village called Marlapalle in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, one of the driest regions in India. 'As the *neerkatti* of this tank, I am responsible for the distribution of stored tank water and its management. I am also responsible for the trees on the tank bund, and ensure that none of the trees are cut by any outsiders,' he further details his responsibilities as a *neerkatti*.

In a time when climate change and global warming are posing threats, a time when water could be ultimate reason for a 'Third World War', stories from the hinterlands of India offers us valuable lessons - lessons on traditional wisdom and lessons on local solutions for sustainable development.

Tanks are the oldest man-made structures, made of earthen bunded reservoirs usually constructed to capture monsoon runoff in this part of arid and semi-arid areas in peninsular India. They are in existence for several centuries, constructed by the *raj*as and *maharaj*as who ruled this part of the world. These tanks have been serving the water needs of communities for generations, both serving as flood moderators in times of heavy rainfall and as drought mitigators in times of long dry spell.

These tanks have been long-since managed and maintained by "*Neerkattis*", belonging to lower caste community and poor. As Anjeppa says, 'For generations, my father, grandfather and people before them had been Neerkattis, and I am now continuing the tradition.' He has been *neerkatti* of Chinnakachikunta for nearly 20 years.

But as the time passed by, these tanks were neglected and ill-maintained. Consequently, the *neerkattis* lost their only scope of contribution and service, thereby endangering their very survival and also this once-important system of water management.

But things are changing today. With the help of DHAN, the villagers renovated the tanks, reviving not only the traditional water harvesting structure, but also reviving the social system that was part of the tank system. The belief is that the rehabilitation of the tank system is not complete without rehabilitating the *Neerkattis* system. So, what villagers did was to revive the *Neerkatti* system along with the revival of these traditional water harvesting structures.

Now the water flows very well in the supply channel in the once silted and defunct system. The tank stores enough water and lasts throughout the year. With this water, the ayacutdhars are now able to cultivate crops in two seasons of crops, which was previously not possible.

The tank rehabilitation work not only had its effect on the ayacutdhars, but also changed the life of our neerkatti, Anjeppa.

'We, neerkattis, were usually neglected and often not cared for by the villagers,' he says of the situation before. But now awareness is created among the villagers on the importance of the traditional water systems, and also the contribution of the *neerkattis* in tank water management.

'It also made me to realize my rights and responsibilities as a *neerkatti*,' says Anjeppa.

Now, the villagers pay him Rs.100 per household in cash or kind for fulfilling my responsibilities, as was it during the days of his forefathers. But Anjeppa is much more happy for the respect he regained among his villagers. 'Now, I and my family are allowed to participate in the village festivals and celebrations, and I am invited to village meetings in making important decisions in the village,' he says.

Now that is change.