Leadership, Enterprise & Empowerment

Tales from Madhya Pradesh
~Stories from the grassroots

WATERSHED ORGANISATION TRUST
“I was young and ambitious. I wanted to become a teacher but I didn’t have what was needed to become one. I needed luck”, says Mojilal. Mojilal was born into a poor family in Jungaliya, a small tribal hamlet in Madhya Pradesh, India. With no opportunities to study, he gave it all up to earn for his family. He was elected as the Sarpanch of his village in 2004. Mojilal lived oblivious of anything that happened around him and time passed quickly until something happened in the year 2007 which put him on a path to an undreamt-of future.

So, what happened?

The WOTR-Wasundhara Program came to his village… WOTR, which had led similar projects in more than 200 villages in Central India, paid the villagers for roughly 80% of the hours worked but also required every family to contribute free labour (Shramdan) to the project every month – a deliberate, calculated move to get the community invested!! Unable to understand why people should work without getting paid in a village where people are already starving, Mojilal like the others, had no option but to participate in all its activities. It took a long time before the people of the village began to trust this Program.

WOTR works with rural Indian villages that come voluntarily with a desire to take part in development programs. This is the only way that program sustainability can be ensured. If it is imposed upon a village then it will be unlikely to have social or political support, making it an unsustainable proposition no matter how helpful it could potentially be. But when a village decides to work with WOTR, both sides know that they will be equal partners in development.

“Seeing the leaders of the village participating in the shramdan, other villagers also participated in huge numbers and work started in the village.” Mojilal reminisces.

Even to live at subsistence, you need surplus. As soon as WOTR saw initiative amongst the people of this village, they brought the NREGS (a government scheme) through which every able bodied person in the village who could work would get work and get paid for the same. A small village where people had to migrate to revolting cities and towns in search of work slowly saw a transformation as they started moving from subsistence toward true self-sustainability. Not only were they exposed to newer and better farming activities, people were shown the importance of information.
and were made aware of the rights they held as a citizen. As the NREGS was active in his village, they planned their watershed work in such a way that no work was replicated and everybody in the village got the best opportunities to work and earn in the village itself.

“I noticed that the other villages took four or five months to get their wages through the NREGA, however, payment would clear within fifteen days in ours. This was because we kept our records meticulously and followed all the procedures through transparency which meant that we were accountable to the people and everything was open to be checked or inspected by anyone. This made it easy for the government to release our payments on time”, Mojilal endorses.

Tell me and I forget; teach me and I remember; involve me and I learn
- Benjamin Franklin

“During this Program I have been able to learn many things as well. Now, I have a broader understanding of how I ought to manage the village and its resources and I have successfully extended my network to different government departments. This has increased my level of confidence and government officers know that I have the necessary knowledge of the system now”, Mojilal adds with pride.

Getting rid of a battlefield…

During the area treatment associated with Watershed Development, different people from the village worked together towards its betterment which brought about a sense of unity; so much so that they decided to bypass the election process and unanimously elected the now more confident and wiser Mojilal as the Sarpanch of the Gram Sabha. “When I remembered the election processes that took place in the past, a picture of a battlefield appeared in my head because that was what the situation was like once upon a time. People used to drink alcohol and fight amongst themselves! This is what our village has been able to get rid of successfully and this is what has made all the difference”, Mojilal continues.

Visions and dreams…

Mojilal has a vision to take his village to the next level now. Firstly, he wants to make sure that the people of his village feel a sense of ownership over the forests around them. He wants to make sure that there will be enough water for agricultural and domestic consumption. He values the importance of education and wants to make sure the children in his village get the best opportunities for the same.

“If someone asks me how things have changed for me, I will always talk about the kind of exposure I received through the Program that played a major role in making me who I am today”, concludes Mojilal.
When the 17 year olds all over the urban world were deciding which college to go to and what they wanted to study, Savita, 17 was married off to a farmer and moved to Mohapani. Very soon, she had two children to look after with a husband who took her to Jabalpur in search of work. “When I came to this village, there was nothing here that attracted me. The land was not fertile; the fields were empty after the cultivation of Kharif crop and people migrated to towns and cities in search of work,” says Savita. Savita and her husband worked for a brick kiln. “It was very tiring work, carrying bricks on my head all day; I didn’t enjoy working at all. At the end of the day I had no desire to cook or eat food. This went on for a long time. In spite of all the hard work, I earned just about enough to survive until there came a day when there was nothing to eat at home and my children were starving and I knew this couldn’t go on forever”, Savita remembers vividly.

It didn’t…

Things changed! They got work in their own village through the Wasundhara program and earned a decent income. Also self-help groups (SHGs) organized into the apex body Samyukta Mahila Sammiti (SMS), gave village women the opportunity to improve their lives through economic growth.

Improving economic prospects within the locality helped repair the social fabric torn by migration. Over a period of time Savita understood the importance of SHG’s and its impact on community involvement in village and individual development. She became a member of the Samyukta Mahila Sammiti and the President of her own Self Help Group. All together, she was provided with opportunities of leadership, responsibility and decision making which transformed her into an extremely dynamic personality. “I never dreamt of holding any type of leadership position in the community. We did farm bunding in our field that resulted in an increase in our farm production almost doubly. Work in the village provided us a good amount of money. Now we do not need to migrate to other places in search of work. When I compare myself as a migrant lady to an SHG president, it seems to be a dream”, adds Savita.

Opportunity + Idea = Enterprise!

A loan of Rs 10,000 from the Samyukta Mahila Sammiti put Savita on a road to enterprise. “I purchased several items like bangles, cosmetics, imitation jewelry and other products for women and got down to business. I started selling these items in weekly markets in the region, visiting about
three markets in a week”, continues Savita happily. In addition to this Savita has set up a shop at her house where she follows the barter system; people who don't have money can buy products in exchange for paddy, Mahua (Dry flowers of Mahua trees) or any other agricultural product. This gives her a higher profit margin compared to her sales in cash. “Last year I earned about twelve thousand rupees by selling the grains which I received from my customers”, Savita adds proudly.

**Reaching out to the silver lining…**

Over the period of two and a half years, Savita has managed to save some money too. She has goods worth Rs 15,000 in her shop, she has Rs 10,000 saved in the bank, she owns four goats, a pair of bullocks, gold and silver jewelry worth Rs 4000 and in addition to all this she owns a plot of land on which they practice farming activities which helps them earn Rs 3000 in a year! “Yes, I have become rich”, Savita declares humorously.

**Priceless choices!**

Why watersheds? In just a couple years Savita went from earning just enough for survival, to owning a shop – from watching her children starve to feeding them nourishing food. “We had just about enough to survive on our own. In case of an emergency we had to borrow money from private moneylenders who charged exorbitant interests on all the loans. This was a dreadful option but we had no way out. Now, I am the owner of my own shop in the village. We have enough food to eat and nobody falls sick easily. I can buy new clothes on different occasions and I can afford to entertain guests at home occasionally. I am not unaware or oblivious of what is happening around me anymore. I am politically, socially and environmentally aware of my surroundings because of the exposure I received through the watershed programs. I have learnt the importance of hygiene; we don't buy the cheapest available products anymore, we make sure we buy quality products so my children are healthy. Their education holds a lot of weight amongst our priorities now. This way they will never face a situation similar to what we went through before the watersheds came to our village”, Savita concludes.

Influencing society in a dramatic way, the whole Wasundhara approach was to take watershed development beyond their purpose of soil and water conservation thereby bringing people the freedom of choice, well being, good health, security and material adequacy.
I just remember the days when I had to borrow money to travel to Jabalpur. Now I am capable of investing one lakh rupees for my business.

The Genesis:

36 year old Pooransingh was born into a very poor family. They owned only 3 acres of land that did not produce sufficient food to feed the whole family throughout the year. Pooransingh says, “I tried different fertilizers and pesticides to increase the productivity of my land.” When that didn't work for him and he had exhausted all the other avenues for raising money, he chose to take a loan from a private moneylender to manage all his expenses. Every year the amount of debt would increase while his land's productivity decreased! He had to go all the way to Jabalpur in search of work where he earned only Rs 40 a day. “Whole day and night I had the same worry, how I could overcome this situation. Most of the time we didn't even have sufficient food for our family; all we could do was add water to the rice and make pej so that everybody would be able would get at least some amount of food”, Pooransingh remembers distinctly.

“A turning point

“One day I saw a poultry farm at Dhamdham, a town, about 7 Kms away from my village. Right then, a thought struck me, why don't I start this activity too?” Pooransingh exclaims passionately. But looking at the structure of the poultry farm, Pooransingh knew it was beyond his capacity to accomplish this task. But the dream wouldn't go and Pooransingh continued doing the area treatment work. He saved some money and finally took the first step into his big dream. He bought 200 chickens. “I started making tiles for a shed; I made about 1500 tiles and constructed a shed in such a way that it could be converted into a house in case my small business venture didn't work out. I collected

“WOTR- the Wasundhara Program came to our village in 2007. I think god must have heard us. I started going for area treatment work along with my wife. It was regular work; we were happy because we earned a good amount of money which helped us get rid of the debt of the private moneylender. Over and above all this, we were able to save money too”, adds Pooransingh.
all the information I needed to on how to run a poultry farm. It was my very first attempt at poultry business so I could only learn from my experiences and that is exactly what I did, earning Rs 4000 in the process”, continues Pooransingh.

Extremely happy with his success Pooransingh bought another lot of chickens, a batch of 250 chickens this time. He continued increasing the number of birds and reached 500 when disaster struck. 150 birds died! Pooransingh was shocked and devastated with this unexpected loss. Yes, Pooransingh's business did include its share of failures. “My misery at the loss didn't last long because I sold the remaining birds at Rs 90/- Kg, the highest market price and recovered all my losses”, he adds happily.

The future looks good!

Today Pooransingh has 1000 chickens which give him an income of Rs. 75000 and he continues to invest more and more. “I just remember the days when I had to borrow money to travel to Jabalpur. Now, I am capable of investing one lakh rupees for my business and I don't even need to ask anyone for help while running this enterprise”, Pooransingh continues with pride.

Little in enough!

Eventually, the little known Pooransingh learnt to run his business with lesser investments in the most effective way. Now, manure from the poultry is being used to grow corn in the field. This corn is used as food for the poultry which saves about 10% of his expenses on poultry feed. He has learnt different methods of providing medicines to the poultry which saves almost 5% of his maintenance costs. “My children help me run this business and the whole family together loves running our enterprise. I have started this business from scratch and now I aspire to increase the capacity of the farm to 5000 birds. Many farmers from my village and the neighboring villages come and visit my farm and learn from my experiences and some of them have started their own poultry farms too”, Pooransingh tells us.

When asked what he'd like to do next, he said he wanted his children to get the best education possible. A small farmer struggling to make ends meet, without food to fill starving mouths is now handling money way beyond his imagination. One realizes now, that the purpose of watersheds is not just bringing water to the villages, conserving soil and providing irrigation facilities; it goes beyond all these accomplishments as it creates opportunities for diverse livelihoods, provides leadership opportunities, mobilizes community and individual enterprise and gives rise to newer and fresher minds taking small villages to another level, altogether!

Eventually, the little known Pooransingh learnt to run his business with lesser investments in the most effective way. Now, manure from the poultry is being used to grow corn in the field. This corn is used as food for the poultry which saves about 10% of his expenses on poultry feed. He has learnt different methods of providing medicines to the poultry which saves almost 5% of his maintenance costs. “My children help me run this business and the whole family together loves running our enterprise. I have started this business from scratch and now I aspire to increase the capacity of the farm to 5000 birds. Many farmers from my village and the neighboring villages come and visit my farm and learn from my experiences and some of them have started their own poultry farms too”, Pooransingh tells us.

When asked what he'd like to do next, he said he wanted his children to get the best education possible. A small farmer struggling to make ends meet, without food to fill starving mouths is now handling money way beyond his imagination. One realizes now, that the purpose of watersheds is not just bringing water to the villages, conserving soil and providing irrigation facilities; it goes beyond all these accomplishments as it creates opportunities for diverse livelihoods, provides leadership opportunities, mobilizes community and individual enterprise and gives rise to newer and fresher minds taking small villages to another level, altogether!
Before and after...

Like the other people in her village, Somati too had a sad history to share. However, today we listen to a transformed woman; a happier, healthier and wiser Somati musing over her inspiring journey through the watershed development period in her village.

“I was born in Kareli. I was deeply attached to my family of five that included my husband, two daughters and my son. However, we still had a lot to complain about. We owned about ten acres of land. Half the land was unproductive so we weren't able to produce more than five quintals of paddy. The rising prices of our day-to-day-needs just made matters worse”, Somati remembers.

“In the beginning, we did not understand the purpose of the Wasundhara Program. When we went for exposure visits to villages where the Project had already been implemented, we understood the whole concept of watershed development. This made all the difference”, Somati tells us. She didn't require any more convincing. We could see her enthusiastic participation in all the activities involved with the Program as she became a member of the Self Help Group in her village. “Seeing my participation in all the activities of the project, my name was suggested for the President of the VDC (Village Development Committee). I was touched by the trust people had in my capacity. I never thought I would be placed in a position where I would get to manage the implementation of such a huge Program”, she adds with pride.

A change can be good!

Somati says, “The Wasundhara Program introduced a new method of farming. When we heard the method of farming they expected us to pursue, we were all highly doubtful.” The Program introduced newer and modern techniques of farming which surprised most of them. It was unlike their traditional method of farming. Everybody was uneasy about the whole process. Demonstration plots were taken up to convince the villagers of the methods efficacy. “With the new method of farming, we were required to sow the crops with a wide distance between them, so wide, that it sounded ridiculous to me! But we had promised to follow their instructions. However, at the end of it, we were pleasantly shocked by the results. Earlier 10 Kgs. of seeds gave us only 35 Kgs. of Gram. Now, 2.5 Kgs. of seeds give us 45 Kgs. of Gram. The crops in the field that looked so thin in the beginning look so full now! We are inspired now, to continue the new method of farming for all the other crops as well. We have had quite a few suspicious and curious visitors since then.
Other farmers in the village also buy seeds from us. I’m sure if we continue farming this way, our village will become self-reliant. I have hope for a better future now”, concludes Somati.

Interestingly, she plans to increase her knowledge about agriculture, not only to increase the productivity of her farm but also to find innovative ways to ensure that her son enjoys agriculture too. However, she is not going to do any of this at the cost of her children’s education. She plans to educate her son and her daughters’ alike so that they will stand on their own feet someday.

A Short Story from Mukhas

Mukhas and Chhitaphal have a good forest cover of around 650 hectares of forest land with 18 different fruit, timber and forest species. Forest produce is one of the important sources of food and livelihood for the people living in this area. The situation, however, is changing rapidly with the forests being cut down in large scale by local contractors and leaders and big farmers. It has not been an easy situation. Active youth from the villages who tried to stop the activity have been threatened by contractors and local politicians.

The gravity of the situation got discussed in the regular VDC and SMS meetings and a special Gramsabha meeting was called on 21st February, 2008. All the committee members and villagers decided to monitor the situation closely. On 4th March, 2008, some of the VDC and SMS members stopped a truck load of teak which was on its way to Silondi. The truck was forcibly unloaded and forest guard was called to register a case. Meanwhile the contractor offered a bribe of Rs. 7000 to SMS- VDC members but they refused to take it. They also warned the forest guard to take action against him with a threat that the matter would be taken up to higher officers. Three persons from Chhitaphal were found to be abetting the contractors. They were fined Rs.500. After this incident Forest officers have recognized and appreciated the initiatives taken by Chhitaphal villagers and have formed a 13-member Forest Protection Committee in Chhitaphal. This committee has the responsibility and authority to look after their forest. All other committees also actively support the FPC.
I just look back into my past and compare my time now, to my life before the program. I was not allowed to open my ghungat or talk to the elders in the village; now, a part of my responsibility is to interact and discuss different issues with them. There was a time when I never spoke to a stranger and here I am now, talking to government officials, officers and people from different villages.

Introducing Dropadi…

“Being a woman how could I handle the responsibilities of VDC (Village Development Committee),” Dropadi of Khamha village in Madhya Pradesh tells us in disbelief as she is elected Secretary of her Village Development Committee (VDC). Read that question again; let it sink in. Dropadi lacked the confidence to lead not for being an uneducated woman or an inexperienced woman, but simply for being a woman. These are the social norms confronting us in many villages, stopping rural people from achieving their full livelihood potential.

Dropadi was a product of this society in Madhya Pradesh. Married at the age of fourteen, she left Navargaon to make herself a new home with her husband and in-laws. Brought up in a traditional environment, Dropadi watched her mother struggling to make ends meet and live like a woman was supposed to and she knew that she had to imitate her mother in her new home now. Dropadi says, “I had to wear a traditional sari with my face covered with a ghungat throughout the day. I never sat in front of the elders in the family as a sign of respect and was subject to many restrictions. I was a woman and women reserved no right to contribute to the decision making process.” She struggled to come to terms with this as she realized that there was no scope for any change and she made the most of what her life was now.

Taking charge…

Dropadi’s family owned about 2.5 acres of land which wasn’t even close to being sufficient to meet all their daily needs. Adding to this misery, the productivity of the land was very low. This is why they had to migrate in search of work. However, Mahamaya and WOTR started the Wasundhara program in 2007 in their village.

The common theme in all Wasundhara projects is development made possible only by a cooperative relationship between WOTR and villages that work with it. When done correctly, the combination of watershed development and Wasundhara socio-economic development leads to a
blossoming of economic fortune.

Before she knew it she was involved in SHG activity (Self Help Groups) and started attending meetings of the SHG’s as well as the watershed programs. Dropadi says, “I didn't even realize how things changed and I really appreciate the way planning was undertaken and the whole community participated.” A bewildered Dropadi couldn't believe it when she was informed of her new responsibility. Dropadi adds in excitement, “Soon I came to know that I would be involved in planning and monitoring activities and as the secretary of VDC, I would become a signatory authority. However, the WOTR team supported me through these terrifying moments and made me understand the importance of handling responsibility.”

**Entrepreneurs from leaders**

Dropadi, unlike the women of her time was bold and ambitious. “To increase my income, I grabbed the opportunity as I got a loan from the Samyukta Mahila Sammiti for goat rearing. I contributed only Rs 1200 but received a loan of Rs 5000 with which I was able to purchase three goats. Now, one year has passed and I am the owner of ten goats”, Dropadi adds proudly.

**Living in the present ...Overwhelmed beyond words!**

During the year that followed, Dropadi spent her time doing soil and water conservation work to repay her loan which was her most important priority. Eventually, the productivity of her land increased two and a half times. Dropadi adds, “I just look back into my past and compare my time now, to my life before the program. I was not allowed to open my ghungat or talk to the elders in the village; now a part of my responsibility is to interact and discuss different issues with them. There was a time when I never spoke to a stranger and here I am now, talking to government officials, officers and people from different villages.”

Apart from restoring water to land, WOTR villagers are now restoring their own dignity and self-determination. Dropadi went from seeing her womanhood as a sign of incompetence to considering herself a 'bold and knowledgeable woman'. Now imagine that in every woman, every man – and in every village. The end of an inspiring story, yet not the last time we speak of Dropadi who stands tall as the VDC secretary today, and knows very well that a future full of surprises awaits her. “I know what I couldn't accomplish; my children can, as my priorities have changed. My children will study and become more successful than I ever dreamed I would be. And one day, I will know I have brought them up well as they contribute to the community in their own small way”, concludes Dropadi.
“We thought about it. How much can one save after all? Does it make any sense for us to continue saving while we miss out on many other opportunities that come our way? Finally, we had the money to start our own business; we just needed an idea for a successful enterprise. In the many discussions the ten of us women had from my SHG, somebody suggested goat rearing as a lucrative option. What a delightful moment it was for us when everybody gave the idea their mutual consent”, Saraswati Bairagi from Katangi, MP begins the narration of her success story.

This is how Sukhiya Bai, Saraswati and eight other enthusiastic women witnessed the birth of their new goat rearing affair!

“We bought a few goats with the money we had saved up. Little did we know how difficult it would be to transform this idea into an actual thriving business venture! We realised that the goats needed a shelter, some place warm and dry so that they would not fall sick easily”, Sukhiya Bai tells us. All ten of them trudged long distances to collect wood, grass, leaves, mud, and sand to build a shed for their goats.

One would think at the beginning, “We don't subscribe to existing stereotypical assumptions about women right”? A business run by 10 women has got to be chaotic and confusing. But Sukhiya Bai tells us how they overcame all this trouble! “After the number of goats reached 11, we sat together and devised a new plan to take care of them.” Now, they follow a fancy shift system where the goats are taken out for routine grazing every 6 days by different women in the group. This way they don't fight amongst themselves and everybody gets a turn each to take care of their little goat rearing business.

Saraswati, with a wide grin on her face tells us about the recent addition of two brand new baby goats to their family. Now their SHG owns 18 goats altogether.

The Samyukta Mahila Sammiti didn't think twice when these women requested them for a loan. Three women from the village who belonged to the very poor class received 10,000 each. However, they have decided to invest this money back into the business. Just like they shared the money equally, they plan to work collectively and repay the loan together. Everybody has been busy taking care of the business and working hard towards repaying the loan as quickly as possible.

Sukhiya says, “With great difficulty we have been able to come together to form this group. For two years, the process of its formation has been stagnant but now, every month on the 15th, all ten of us get together to collect our monthly savings. Sometimes,
each of us contributes Rs. 50 while sometimes we contribute Rs 100 if we are able to get good work in the village. We have been able to save up almost Rs. 12,000 in the process.”

A woman from the self help group concludes “There have been several attempts to form a group like this in the past. Most of them failed and didn’t work out. They lost interest easily. But after the Program came to our village, things have been different. We are determined to put in all our efforts and show the others how efficient and smooth the journey has been while making this business a successful one and how it has had a dramatic impact on each one of our lives.”

Mukhas, the Heroic Village again!

In the month of November 2006, the first year of WOTR’s work in the area, Mukhas was hit by an epidemic of chicken pox. The intensity of the epidemic was high, killing 2 children. The people, in panic, ran to the BMO and Doctors were informed. In-spite of organizing a health camp, the situation escalated and became critical with 4 more children dying in the first week of December. It was at this point that the local media woke up to the situation and sounded the alarm. The local Administration and Health Department came under severe pressure from the District and State authorities. Intensive health camps were organized and an army of “specialized” doctors were brought in to attend to the situation. Along with them, came the local politicians, bureaucrats and some more media. The police were not far behind, and Namdev and Dahiya (from the local NGO) were arrested to be tossed in jail. The now-riled villagers became aggressive, as they saw their one means of help and succor, being decimated and defamed and that too unjustly. Cases were filed against Namdev, Dahiya and 16 other villagers on charges of rioting and misleading the people.

The epidemic was finally controlled, but it left its mark. For one, it became a trigger and a key factor for the mobilization process for the project in Mukhas. And Mukhas became a standing example, perhaps one of the best examples, of the kind of impact the Wasundhara Approach can have on a community. Mukhas's political situation is a changed one today. Where it never had a visit from local bureaucracy, today the local administration pays regular visits. The women groups take initiative and without hesitation are able to approach them, if necessary, to voice their complaints and needs.
Jirabai chuckles as she tells us how she stopped everybody from going for the exposure visits when the Wasundhara Program was introduced to Chittaphal in 2007.

She had come to this village when she got married off and often remembers her family home where they all lived together as a joint family. Looking back into the past makes her feel sad, as she remembers the time she spent with her husband. “Life was alright then. But suddenly, he became very ill and passed away in spite of our continuous efforts to save him”, Jirabai begins. This incident drained their pockets of the little money they had and Jirabai just couldn't do justice to all the responsibility that fell onto her shoulders. “It was a hard life then. My son was eleven and my daughter, seven. I didn't get a chance to educate my children”, continues Jirabai.

“In 2007, people from Jai Bharti and WOTR started visiting the village. They talked about watershed development, something which we never heard about. An exposure tour was planned to understand the Program better. As soon as I heard about it, I told people not to go for it. I feel funny admitting this now but I thought the people implementing the Project would bribe the secretary of the Panchayat and sell our children and they would never come back. In spite of telling people not to go, a few men from the village went for the tour. Sure enough, the team didn't return at the scheduled time”, says Jirabai. Women in the village started worrying about them. “I took delight in reminding them of my cautioning words. Everybody agreed with me and admitted to having made a mistake. After sometime we got a phone call informing us that they were all safe and were on their way back home” Jirabai adds sheepishly.

From fear to faith…

The enthusiastic participants spent the next day narrating the experiences of the exposure visit thereby motivating Jirabai and many others like her who changed their attitude towards the Program soon after this. In no time, she became a member of the Self Help Group in her village. Finally, she gathered the courage to go for an exposure visit herself. “We were taken to Shahdol. All of us had only one thought stuck in our minds. We thought the Program people would take away our land. During the visit, some group games were played. We all enjoyed ourselves and gradually our fear turned into faith towards the WOTR staff”, Jirabai reminisces. After this, Jirabai started taking an active interest in the activities of watershed development. She attended the SHG and Gramsabha gatherings. In addition to this, she enjoyed the area treatment work too. “Now I understand the importance of banking services, institutional work, and the
role of the community in watershed development amongst many others”, says Jirabai.

“One important thing we have realised is that we, as a community, are responsible to protect and regenerate our forests and natural resources in and around the village. Earlier, loads of trucks used to take the wood from our forest and we never concerned ourselves with that. But now we have started opposing wood cutting. We ourselves have decided not to harm the forest and protect it from outsiders”, says Jirabai.

Jirabai and others to the rescue…

She goes on to narrate incidents within the village where people have taken active interest in this situation. It is not only men who take on these issues, but women are equally vocal and active. “One day we came to know that a truck had come into the forest to take wood. It was 10 o'clock in the evening. Four women and seven men blocked the road and tried to stop the truck. But the truck driver escaped from us. After few days we found that a tractor had come to take wood in the forest. Again we reached the same spot but this time we blocked the road in such a way that the driver could not run away. We caught the driver and called the officers from Forest Department. They charged him with the offence and the matter is in the court now. The owner of the tractor tried to threaten us when we went to weekly market. But we weren't amongst the ones who would get afraid of him”, Jirabai continues her story bravely. She concludes,

“We could do this because we feel responsible and know our rights.”

Jirabai ends her story happily, though in disbelief of how dramatically her life has changed from a timid, unhappy widow to a dauntless, heroic village woman who will not tolerate anyone who comes in her way while she protects the forests that surround her village!
The Wasundhara Approach uniquely combines various facets of leadership, enterprise, economics, and technology and addresses itself to the contextual socio-cultural, environmental, political and economic conditions of a region. In that, the Wasundhara Approach is neither a technique nor solution. It is, as the name suggests, an Approach.

Water shortages can drive farmers to suicide. One bad season could throw them into an endless cycle of debt, dishonour and hunger, often ending in the tragedy of the farmer selling his land and seeking employment in nearby towns as a menial labourer, with no other livelihood options, and no skills which could be used locally. Rural communities face the daily reality of resource insecurity - a combination of scarcity, vulnerability and stress. It is a very real condition of everyday life that relates to the communities’ reduced ability to cope with, anticipate and recover from any further detrimental impact.

Today, WOTR’s initiative in 8 villages of Madhya Pradesh has paid off. A variety of local enterprises have sprung up that cater locally to local needs, driving the local economy upward. Leadership now has many faces. There is work available in the villages, land has become more productive, the water tables have risen, and people have begun working together.

The journey from “no” to “yes”, from “cannot” to “can”, from “should not” to “why not” was a long one indeed. There were as many points of views as people, and as many problems as points of view. Right from the internal, personal resistance to participation – men resisting the presence of women, the landed resisting the landless, the moneyed rejecting the poor man’s capacity to think and decide, to the rumbles in the local politics and bureaucracy, tensions and local power equations being upset.