

Publication: Times Of India Delhi;Date: Apr 25, 2009;Section: Lead India;Page: 4



## Not a new fad, but an idea that works on the ground

**Vishwas Kothari | TNN**

Hindus have built a mosque for the lone Muslim family living in this village of about 237 families; there are no caste community fights; people work together on initiatives aimed at securing better life, health and education for the village.

What was once a perennially drought prone area is now a green zone. The village has neatly laid concrete roads, public toilets and sanitation systems. The men have virtually no vices as liquor, cigarettes and paan kiosks are banned. Cattle-grazing and tree-felling is a "strict no" and so is open defecation.

Sounds like a far-fetched fairy tale? Travel just 100 km from Pune to see this utopia for yourself. Hiware Bazar, a village of 1,300 people, spread over 1,000 hectares has transformed itself because people came together and toiled for progress through measures like water conservation and voluntary donation of labour (shram daan).

The village has annual rainfall ranging between 200 and 400 mm. Almost all of the population was below the poverty line just two decades ago. Migration to cities like Mumbai, Pune and Ahmednagar was common as villagers looked for better livelihood options. Bootlegging was rampant. Fights within village groups were a common place.

Today, the village's transformation to a model of rural sustainability through people's participation has spurred several families that had migrated to come back home.

For instance, Popat Borkar (25) was a kid when his father, Tulshiram, migrated to Rajapur in search of work. "The seven-acre ancestral land we have here was of no use then, owing to water scarcity," recalls Borkar.

A year back, the Borkars learnt about Hiware Bazar's progress and decided to come back home. "I am now making nearly Rs 1.5 lakh annually from the crops, which I take at least thrice a year," says Borkar.

Babanrao Thange and Yadavdada Thange, both of whom had migrated to Mumbai to work in textile mills, have a similar story to tell. Murlidhar Kharat, who took voluntary retirement from an airline in Mumbai, chose to return even as his two sons have moved on to the US for higher studies.

According to Popatrao Pawar, the sarpanch, at least 57 families have returned over the

last decade. Pawar, an MCom and former Kanga league cricket player in Mumbai, has been headman since 1989 and is credited with single-handedly inspiring villagers to use their efforts to transform Hiware Bazar.

His approach was simple: strengthen the gram sabha by involving everyone in decision-making, get villagers to work together, and ensure transparency through social audits.

“We started with focusing on the village school, which was only up to Std IV. Now, it teaches students up to Std X. The village has 72 primary and secondary teachers besides four lecturers and four doctors,” he said.

Soon, the focus shifted to water conservation as scarcity of water was at the root of most problems. “We decided that water conservation should be at the core of all development initiatives,” he said. The state government’s ‘Ideal village scheme’, announced in 1994-95, gave a further fillip to the villagers’ efforts.

An elaborate exercise was launched for continuous contour trenching (CCT), a low-cost and efficient rain water harvesting method, covering nearly 250 hectares of hillocks surrounding the village. Roadside plantations, cement concrete check dams, pazar taloas (minor lakes) and other water shed development programmes were implemented through voluntary donation of labour.

“Digging of borewells was banned and a water audit system was introduced for planning

the crops to be undertaken for cultivation,” he said. Though Ahmednagar district has the highest concentration of cooperative sugar mills, the villagers consciously opted against taking water-intensive crops like sugarcane and banana.

“The efforts have worked wonders,” recalls septuagenarian Deubai Babasaheb Thange. “Earlier, we had to go long distances to fetch drinking water. Now, we get water at our doorsteps,” she said.

Dairying was promoted through finance by nationalised and cooperative banks. “The village council stands as guarantor. Our only condition is that the farmer should spend the loan only on the purpose for which he avails it,” said Pawar. Agriculture and dairying are now the mainstay of Hiware Bazar’s thriving economy. Deubai’s family, for instance, has a dairy farm with six Danish hybrid Holsten cows and four domestic cows besides maintaining a five-acre irrigated land.

The village council has also been promoting biogas, as an eco-friendly and healthy alternative. The village has bagged several awards including the 1995 model village award, 2007 Nirmalgram award and the Centre’s water award also in 2007.



Popatrao Pawar



RIGHT LESSONS: Schoolchildren carry out a cleanliness drive in front of the Hiware Bazar village council office