

UNCOMMON GROUND
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A FINE BALANCE IN KUTCH

As always, the monsoon may or may not come in time and in adequate quantity across the country. As always, again, people who live in the dry areas of the country, especially in the western desert districts of Rajasthan and Gujarat, with less than 250mm of average annual rainfall, will have to cope with scarcity, as they do year on year.

Last week, I was in the Kutch region, on work, with soaring temperatures and no promise of rain despite an unusual cloud cover. We travelled a couple of hundred kilometres in the clay desert, despairing at the spread of *Prosopis juliflora* which—like so many other foreign species brought in by the forest department with all good intentions—has now overpowered large tracts of the countryside, to the detriment of useful, hardy local species.

We also marvelled at the raw beauty of the dry landscape, which yielded sudden delights such as a male *nilgai* in his prime and slender green bee-eaters diving gracefully in search of prey.

Arid districts such as Kutch in Gujarat, and Barmer and Jaisalmer in Rajasthan mainly have livestock economies and it is not unusual to see thousands of animals—goats, cows, sheep, buffaloes and camels—moving amiably along in search of the next watering hole. It seems counter-intuitive that areas with such low rainfall should provide neighbouring

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states with meat and milk. IWMI (the International Water Management Institute) has done unique research to show how there is a massive export of virtual water from dry regions to wet through the sale of these products, leaving open some interesting questions on policy.

Yet, once you talk to the villagers and farmers, it quickly becomes clear how enmeshed are the lives of the people with the cattle. In a small village called Haripar, we walked across a ridge road, recently constructed by the villagers to provide access to the only well in the area, dug right in the middle of the catchment pond, which they hoped would fill up with the season's first two showers. The women will use the road

this year to bring home the drinking water for the day.

Why not put in pipes and pumps to draw water to the settlement instead? That, the women assured us, would destroy the delicate balance they have maintained for so long, between *samaj, pani* and *jaanwar*—society, water and cattle. If people get water in pipes, the water of the well would quickly run out, since it would be very hard to control its use. How would the cattle that often depend on the same water source manage? Without the cattle, there would be no livelihood. No one would benefit in the long run.

This wisdom, though ancient, had been lost and was recovered in the recent past. Many of the traditional rainwater harvesting structures and methodologies, with all their attendant social controls, had been abandoned by people, lured by the promise of reliable surface water. The Narmada canal was to bring abundance here, and massive infrastructure has been built for this grand vision. Now, it is amply evident to the tail-enders that the canal can never bring sustainable water for all. Painfully, and slowly, they are returning to their tried and trusted ways.

Somewhat surprisingly, the state government has come to their aid. It has set up an innovative partnership project which, if successful, will alter the perception that governments do not admit mistakes and cannot do course correction. An autonomous entity suitably endowed with financial resources has been set up to work with *gram panchayats*, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors to enable people to recreate local governance mechanisms for water security. There is clear signalling that the much-touted surface water schemes will not be the primary source of water in the

region, but will serve as a backup or an additional source.

This is a huge admission coming from the state. It can provide a great example to governments in many other situations. For example, urban local bodies across the country can use this to rethink the prevailing and unsustainable model of getting water to our cities at any cost, and from surface water receding more and more.

Meanwhile, in Kutch, the work continues. Using new technologies and approaches, people are innovating beyond earlier models to create a sustainable water infrastructure. Solar pumps have been installed in some places to compensate for the irregular supply of electricity. New kinds of percolation tanks are being built, new designs tried out for storage and distribution. Local people are being trained in operations and maintenance. Many NGOs are involved in this huge capacity-building exercise. It seems to be yielding social dividends. Quite unusually, in the Kutch villages of Haripar and Karamta, we met strong women leaders who were at the forefront of the discussion, with the men sitting quietly in the back rows. But it will take the strength of the whole village to accomplish the mission they have set for themselves. It is no mean task to convince people all over again to live within their ecological limits.

If it's so hard for them, who've so long lived in a fine balance with nature, how much harder will it be for the rest of us?

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