

Women groups lead spring revival in Himachal Pradesh, India

The SCA-Himalaya's science-based springshed management initiative is being implemented in four Indian Himalayan states, namely Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Manipur and Sikkim. The main objective of this initiative is to revive critical springs that are a lifeline for rural households vulnerable to climate change. These households depend on springs for drinking water as well as to meet their domestic, agricultural, and cultural needs.

The initiative is being run in five villages that have government water supply schemes, but that face water shortage during the lean months. Traditionally, women of the household are responsible for fetching water in rural areas. Therefore, water shortages affect them the most. They have to walk long distances to collect water from springs or streams, or depend on water tankers arranged by local authorities. Water conflicts are not uncommon during the dry season, which lasts for 3–4 months. The springshed management approach for reviving springs combines hydrogeology with social sciences and community action. It is important to have an effective local body for making decisions related to spring water use and spring resource management. An important element of such a body would be user groups for managing springs and recharge areas. While forming a user group, it must be ensured that women as well as diverse caste/ethnic groups and people from different economic strata are included in the group.

In Himachal Pradesh, the spring initiative is working with women groups known as Mahila Mandals in Bonderi and Matiyal villages of Chamba district and Kangra district, respectively. Mahila Mandal is one of the most active community-based organisations in Himachal Pradesh. The group carries out livelihood and development activities at the village or panchayat level. In Matiyal and Bonderi, an NGO called CORD supports Mahila Mandals to carry out springshed management activities. As part of these activities, Mahila Mandals form water user groups for managing springs.

The spring initiative works with Mahila Mandals to conduct action research on spring revival. In Matiyal village, Mahila Mandal has 28 members who lead the efforts to revive and manage a critical depression spring (locally known as Johad Bawdi) and the associated recharge areas that lie in private agricultural fields and the state forest land. The group meets every month to discuss water issues and monitor progress on spring revival. Apart from facilitating the activities of the water user group of Johad Bawadi, the group discusses their agendas, such as monitoring water issues and related data, cleaning the spring, implementing spring management protocols, etc. Fifteen households that are part of the water user group are contributing five Indian rupees each per month into a spring maintenance fund. The goal is to establish a sustainable means of covering the recurrent costs of maintaining and protecting the springs.

Women users perform various cultural/religious rituals at the spring and feel a sense of ownership towards the water source. The water user group has formulated a set of rules and regulations for

spring management. A similar approach of working with women groups is being applied in the state of Uttarakhand, too.

The progress made by the spring initiative indicates that grassroots women groups can be highly effective local institutions for implementing and upscaling springshed management in the Indian Himalayan region.



Johad Bawdi spring in Matiyal selected for revival (Source: CORD-Sindhbari)



Matiyal Mahila Mandal at the Johad Bawdi (Source: CORD-Sindhbari)



Spring revival co-learning team with the 28-member Mahila Mandal of Matiyal village, Baroh Block, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh (Photo: Jitendra Bajracharya)