

# How a Village Learned to Catch Water

## The Untold Story of National Award-winning Film *Paani*

The 2019 Marathi film *Paani* is a fictionalized account of Nagdarwadi, a drought-stricken village in Maharashtra, grappling with extreme water scarcity. Inspired by real events, the film follows a young community mobilizer who leads the efforts to tackle the village's water crisis. This article by **WOTR Communications team** explores how collective action transformed Nagdarwadi from a struggling village into a model for watershed development.

### A Village on the Edge

In the late 1990s, Nagdarwadi—a village in Maharashtra's drought-prone Nanded district—stood as a stark

symbol of the harsh realities across Marathwada. The area, marked by **erratic monsoons** and blistering summers, faced a recurring specter of water scarcity. Each morning, village residents set off

before dawn, trekking long distances to fill containers with barely enough water to meet their daily needs. Agriculture faltered under the dry conditions, and young men felt compelled to leave in search of better prospects in distant cities. Moreover, the village was rife with conflicts among its inhabitants, leaving little hope for progress. As Harish Daware, Deputy Director at WOTR (Watershed Organisation Trust) puts it: "This was a village where NGOs found it difficult to work because of the social complexities and conflicts. People couldn't imagine a sustainable life here, and families wouldn't send their daughters for marriage due to the constant water shortage."

WOTR, during this time, had been working in the Marathwada region, focusing on transforming drought-prone villages through sustainable land and water management under the Indo-German Watershed Development Programme (IGWDP). Balaji Kendre, one of WOTR's social officers and trainers, was a native of Nagdarwadi. During an informal visit to his village, Balaji's colleagues urged him to consider initiating the watershed project there. But Balaji was hesitant. He knew the deep-rooted social issues and daunting physical terrain, and the thought of



tackling them was intimidating—especially since these projects relied on *shramdaan*, voluntary labour by the community. In Nagdarwadi, where cooperation was hard-won, rallying the village to take on such a demanding initiative seemed almost impossible.

The regional team at WOTR, led by Dr Venkatesh Tagat (on deputation to WOTR from NABARD) however, was not deterred. “Dr Tagat told Balaji, ‘If you take up this work in your village, you can inspire other villages to follow your example,’” Harish recalled. Inspired by his team’s persistence, Balaji resolved to give it a try. He was not alone. His younger brother, Hanumant Kendre, soon became an essential partner in the effort as a community mobilizer ultimately becoming a linchpin of the project.

With Balaji’s commitment secured, WOTR teamed up with Sanskriti Samvardhan Mandal (SSM), a partner NGO experienced in implementing watershed projects across challenging terrains. SSM’s established rapport and proven ability to navigate complex environmental and social conditions made them an ideal ally for the ambitious work ahead in Nagdarwadi. SSM’s chairman, Pramod Deshmukh, remembers the villagers’ skepticism.



“Convincing people to dig trenches on hillsides wasn’t easy,” he said.

“Nagdarwadi was the kind of place where people had a bald spot on their head from carrying water over long distances each day,” Deshmukh recalled. “To them, bringing water closer to home seemed unimaginable.”

## Breaking Ground, Building Trust

As the project’s community mobilizer, Hanumant began connecting with villagers and forming Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with local women, turning

the watershed effort into a collective mission. The men of the village opposed but he persevered. Midway, his marriage proposal fell through when his prospective in-laws insisted he leave Nagdarwadi for a “better” future in Nanded. Hoping to prove himself and win back the girl, Hanumant stayed, encouraged by his brother’s words: “Those who stay and make a difference are remembered. Escaping is the easier choice.” With slow but steady progress, Hanumant and his team gained the community’s trust, fighting against those who fuelled conflicts.

Guided by WOTR and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), and with NABARD and KfW’s (a German state-owned investment and development bank) funding support, the village embarked on an intensive watershed development process. “We started by selecting the NGO and mobilizing the community, then conducted training sessions, organized *shramdaans* (voluntary labour days), and formed village committees,” Harish explained. The vision was to build a sustainable water management model owned by the villagers themselves.

The first few steps of the project were carefully structured:

### 1. Community Mobilization and Voluntary Labour (*Shramdaan*):

Four initial *shramdaans* were





conducted, engaging the residents of Nagdarwadi in voluntary work to build a sense of collective ownership.

**2. Project Planning:** WOTR supported SSM and the village in developing a detailed project plan (DPR), refining it through regular feedback.

**3. Capacity Building and Training Programmes:** Committees were trained in water conservation, agriculture, and entrepreneurship, directly linking water security to new livelihood options.

**4. Exposure Visits:** WOTR organized visits to successful watershed projects in places like Mendhwan and Darewadi, showing Nagdarwadi's villagers what could be achieved through dedication and teamwork.

As trenches took shape, bunding structures were constructed, and new plantations were introduced, visible signs of progress emerged. "At first, people doubted that working on the hillsides would actually bring water," Pramod shared. "But as water levels rose in the wells, hope began to grow."

"Frequent visits from WOTR leaders, including Crispino Lobo, Marcella

D'Souza, and Venkatesh Tagat for monitoring and training, reassured the villagers that they were partners in this transformation," Pramod recalled. "We made mistakes, but they encouraged us to keep going, reminding us, 'Those who work make mistakes, and that's okay.'"

## A Transformation Rooted in Community

Within five years, Nagdarwadi had shifted from a drought-stricken area to a self-reliant village. Water was now accessible year-round, lifting a heavy burden from families and reducing the need for migration. Hanumant's commitment to the village strengthened community bonds, earning him respect and a new sense of purpose.

Beyond securing water, WOTR's approach tied water management to agricultural and dairy development, making this project a socio-economic milestone. As Pramod highlighted, "The aim wasn't just water conservation. WOTR's strategy was to connect water to agriculture and dairy, making this a **technical and socio-economic success.**"

## A Story Retold through *Paani*

Nagdarwadi's story gained both national and international recognition through *Paani*, the 2019 Marathi film directed by Adinath M Kothare and produced by Priyanka Chopra Jonas. Inspired by Nagdarwadi's journey—one of the 200 villages participating in the Indo-German Watershed Programme—the film captures the struggle for water in rural India. *Paani* went on to win the National Film Award for Best Film on Environment Conservation, highlighting the resilience of communities like Nagdarwadi in the face of scarcity.

Today, Nagdarwadi is a testament to what a committed community, guided by focused intervention, can accomplish despite overwhelming adversity. It stands as a symbol of resilience, a reminder that even the most challenging realities can be transformed with unity, hope, and sustained effort. ■

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