

Scarcity spurs water conservation campaign

A village in Dharmapuri district shows the way in mobilising people's support for a celebrated cause

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CHENNAI: Selvi and Ponmalar, young mothers with two children each, hail from agricultural families in Sandaipatti village near Morappur town in Dharmapuri district in the western part of the State.

While Selvi is an agricultural worker and a beneficiary of the 100-day rural job scheme, officially called Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Ponmalar's family owns about 2.5 acres of land.

They differ from each other on several matters – for example, on the impact of the MGNREGS.

But, when it comes to water, they are together. Six months ago, they went around their village as part of the community water walk to identify water resources.

It is not just that they are conscious of scarce availability of water in their village but also they are aware of using tools such as water bud-



Women of Sandaipatti village in Dharmapuri district explaining features of water budget – PHOTO: K.V. SRINIVASAN

geting. Besides, they are getting sensitised to various ways to save water.

Water security plan

They are all part of a team, Community Change Man-

agement Group (CCMG), which takes upon itself the task of drawing up a water security plan for the Sandaipatti village. The CCMG includes both the young and the old, members of water

users' associations, retired government employees or teachers and Dalits.

One may not have to be surprised about the kind of interest shown by Selvi and Ponmalar in water issues as

their district is known for water shortage, both in quantity and quality. [Their block, Morappur, notorious for overextraction of groundwater resources, has been chosen by the Union Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation for a two-year-long project to achieve drinking water security in a holistic manner].

But, what is refreshing is that even in areas, known for high rainfall or better water availability, the idea of water conservation is catching up, as evident in the Kilathivakkam village of Acharapakam block in Kancheepuram district.

A. Govindasamy, president of the water users' association in the village, feels that better water management practices not only lead to saving water but also saving money, especially for farmers. After taking to the System of Rice Intensification he now uses three kg of seeds per acre whereas, till recently, he was using 30 to 35 kg.

In the nearby Keezhmaruvathur, Baskara Reddiar and his entire family are an example of how higher productivity can be achieved, using less water. Terms like micro irrigation, precision farming and drip fertigation, a practice of conjunctive application of fertilizers and water to crop plants, are no longer Latin to Govindasamy, Baskara Reddiar, Selvi and Ponmalar.

Sandaipatti and Kilathivakkam are among 200 villages spread over six districts which have been identified for the programme - Model Villages of the Blue Green Movement.

The other four districts are Tiruvallur, Salem, Cuddalore and Tiruchi.

The programme, conceptualised and implemented by the Centre of Excellence for Change (CEC), requires the villages to work towards protection of all water sources, shared water vision, drinking water for all, preservation of every drop of water, improved water and crop pro-

ductivity, enhanced farm income, zero tolerance of open defecation and above all, a clean and green environment.

All these should be achieved by the application of principles of community participation, accountability and transparency.

The CEC, which provides a platform for experts from different sectors for convergence of ideas and action in the areas of water and food, facilitates the establishment of single-window information and knowledge centres. It is in these centres that officials of departments of Agriculture, Horticulture, Agricultural Engineering, Agricultural Marketing, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries besides Tamil Nadu Agricultural University offer their expertise to discerning agriculturists in improving their farm practices, while underscoring the importance of water conservation. According to the CEC, [a body formed by officials from a variety of government

bodies and institutions of higher education.] Tamil Nadu's per capita availability of water resources is only 900 cubic meters a year against the national figure of 2,200 cubic meters.

Agriculture consumes 86 per cent of the available water in the State. Ill-managed irrigation systems, coupled with popular farm choices for water-guzzling crops, are responsible for pushing Tamil Nadu into, what the CEC describes, a "water scarcity trap."

It is for all these reasons that the Blue Green Movement should be extended to all other villages and this is possible only when the State Government adopts the Movement as its own, says a CEC representative. In Sandaipatti, the first water budget was recently prepared largely with the help of the CEC officials.

"Next time [which will be in June], we ourselves will draw up the budget," Selvi and Ponmalar say with a great deal of confidence.