

Jal Sahelis to the rescue in UP districts

Women come together to resolve water issues in Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur in Bundelkhand

MALLAHANPURA (JALAUN): In the villages of Bundelkhand region, women spend an average of three to nine hours a day fetching water from the few sources available, as millions of women do across the country.



HT PHOTO A Paani Panchayat meeting in one of the villages in Jalaun.

However, women of 96 villages decided they could change the narrative — and they did.

Women of a village got together to form a Paani Panchayat, a model of selfgovernance limited to water issues in that village. The focus of this all-women — and mostly Dalit women — endeavour has been to create more water resources, revitalise some old ones and conserve natural and old water bodies so that water is available as a basic right. The two best members of each Paani Panchayat are nominated as Jal Sahelis (water friends) for that village.

In Mallahanpura village, Rampura block of Jalaun district, Meera Devi (40) used to spend over five hours a day to fetch water till Paani Panchayat stepped in. “The Paani Panchayat led by Jal Sahelis worked as awareness and pressure group to deal with water issues in the village. We have more water and it’s easier now,” says her husband Shyam Singh (42).

A Paani Panchayat works through meetings of its members, campaigns to spread awareness and gather numbers, then pressurising the village pradhan and district officials to get work done. At the last count, 96 villages in three, of seven districts that make Uttar Pradesh’s Bundelkhand region, had Paani Panchayats; the districts are Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur.

Prema Devi (55), illiterate, is a Jal Saheli in Mallahanpura. She says: “Our Paani Panchayat is a 20-member all women one. We pressurised officials and managed to get two new handpumps and repair old ones. Before the onset of monsoon, we decided that through voluntary community work, we would clear the obstructions in the only pond we have so that more rain water finds its way there. We mobilised the village, almost all men and women worked two hours several days. Now we have water in the pond. The next step is to coerce the district administration to clean and de-silt it.”

Shyam Singh explains: “Earlier Meera used to go to a handpump 150 metres away and made three trips each day. Each trip apart from walking to and fro had an average waiting time of one-and-a-half hours before her turn came to fill water. The queue used to be longer because 10 of the 26 hand pumps were out of order for a very long time. Paani Panchayat pressurised the gram pradhan, block development officer (BDO) and sub-divisional magistrate (SDM); now all the 26 handpumps work, including the one that is barely 10 metres from my home.”

The Paani Panchayat concept was part of a project to establish women’s right to water; Jalaun-based Parmarth Seva Sansthan executed the project with aid from the European Union. “The idea is to increase women’s participation in decision-making about water,” says Sanjay Singh of PSS.