

From saline water to safe water – the story of Kharaghoda

Kharaghoda a village from the Dasada taluka of Surendranagar has a population of 12,500 of which almost 85 per cent are 'agariyas' or salt-pan workers. The Pani Samiti had published an appeal for collection of community contribution for development of the water supply and sanitation system under the ERR programme. The response was very good and the community differential contribution was collected based on socio-economic status of the people, with industrial connections paying more and agariyas paying lesser. Even the poorest families contributed between Rs. 50-150. The system developed includes a bore well, a sump of 4,50,000 litres capacity, an ESR, distribution pipelines, pump house, pumping machinery and sanitation units in 3 schools. However, the water was not of potable quality and had TDS of 2200. Finally to combat the water quality problem an RO plant was also set up as a part of the water supply system for providing safe drinking water.

The community has shown amazing entrepreneurial spirit and set an example of public private partnership. The Pani Samiti Chairperson, Rajubhai, has taken lead in the entire process and also currently operates the plant, since no operator could be found. A B.Com graduate, Rajubhai, is happy that he has been able to put his education to use for a cause that serves the entire village.

The Samiti spent Rs. 27,000 for the purchase of 250 plastic bottles. It plans to buy more bottles for replacement when more fund is available. Currently, the same bottles are refilled and given to the consumers. About 300 households from different parts of Kharaghoda village presently buy water from the RO plant. The contractor also supplies water to 150 customers in Patdi village, while another 20 pick up the water themselves. Thus the plant is optimally being utilized by the two villages. The elaborate norms laid down by the Pani Samiti for operation of the plant are:

- Consumers to pay a deposit of Rs .100 to Pani Samiti for supply of water at home in 20 litres plastic bottles
- Collection of water from the plant itself by the consumer to be done between 8:00 am to 6:00 pm
- Coupon system for collecting water from the plant to be followed. A deposit of Rs. 1600 to be made to the operator for which consumer will be given Rs. 2 coupons. Each time 20 litres water is collected one coupon is to be given.
- Water to be available at following rates
 - To people from the village @ 10 paise/litre

- To people from other villages @ 20 paise/litre
 - For commercial purposes @ 50 paise/litre
- Contract for water distribution has been awarded through inviting tenders

Although many people have started using the water from the RO plant, there are still some apprehensions among people such as how the body will react to this pure water provided by the RO plant after having consumed saline water for years together? And, if one gets used to drinking water from the RO plant and has to go back to drinking water with excessive salts, how will the body react then? But through consistent and appropriate awareness and information efforts, it is hoped that these doubts will be laid to rest and more and more people will start consuming the water treated at the RO plant.

Appreciation for safe water is on the rise in the village and more and more people are willing to pay for it. Keshavlal Patel a resident of Jagdish society says, "Earlier we used to fetch water in a tractor from the village pond. Now we get pure and salt-free water very close to our homes for only two rupees which is quite affordable." Ushaben says, "Paying Rs. 2 for 20 litres of pure water from the RO plant is nothing compared to paying a rupee for a small pouch of water. Ever since the RO plant has become functional, I come here regularly for drinking water and for other uses tap water is available at home."