Integrated programme enables prudent use of water

M. J. Prabu

The project serves to benefit five villages covering an area of 1,370 hectares. Photo: Special Arrangement

Minimal use of water, avoiding its wastage and proper ways of conservation are the key inputs to sustain any agricultural activity.

As a part of its comprehensive rural development initiatives, the National Agro Foundation, Chennai, has taken up creation of watershed projects in Kanchipuram district, Tamil Nadu. The project, supported by the Nabard Watershed Development Fund, serves to benefit five villages covering an area of 1,370 hectares.

Lack awareness

“Initially we could not make much headway into this because farmers lacked the awareness about the importance of watersheds and did not know that this would help them complete their two-season crop growing calendar. We realized that though there is good rainfall, there was not enough water harvesting at the village level, which was the root cause of the misery.

“Often the lakes that serve as main source of water for the first season and wells, for the second season, were dry during summer,” says Mr. S.V.Murugan, Nodal officer of the foundation.

Discussion with farmers led to forming a watershed committee involving the local people and named as Arasur watershed program. The first work that the committee undertook after its formation was to repair an old temple pond in a village called Kumili.

“Soon after monsoon season, farmers called us to inform that the water table level has considerably improved in their wells,” he says.

Enthused by the instant benefit, efforts were subsequently expanded to cover a 100-hectare area as a pilot project with support from Nabard wherein low cost water harvesting measures like farm ponds, sunken ponds, strengthening of field bunds, cleaning up of supply channels, percolation ponds etc were constructed” says a veteran farmer, R. Jothi, who heads the watershed committee.

“About 3,400 lakh litres of water has so far been saved from being wasted and we are able to harvest not only a second crop but also go in for a third short term cultivation which adds to our income,” says Mr. Jothi.

Increase in level

“We are able to see an increase in water table up to 2.5 metres in our wells even now. This has motivated neighbouring villagers to participate in this program,” says Mr. C. Sudhakar, from adjoining Chitur village who is now a member of the committee. Efforts are now on to cover an additional area of about 1,250 hectares comprising
Chitur, Andarkuppam, Mampattu, Mampakkam and Agaram villages involving about 750 families with a population of 3,000 people. The State Government also shares the financial support.

**Additional components**

“The watershed design also accommodates additional components like afforestation, governance, livelihood promotion, training and demonstration.

“It is inclusive as it involves both landless and cultivating farmers. It is the blend of native wisdom of the community coupled with scientific expertise, which makes the program unique” says Brig R.I. Raghunathan, CEO of the foundation who spearheads the entire watershed program.

The special feature of the program is the active involvement of village community from project planning to implementation and maintenance, a bottoms-up approach.

“It is by the community, for the community and of the community which is the key for its long term sustainability”, he adds.

“Our farmers have made full use of the watershed program as the benefits are immense. Usually our crops get affected during heavy rains in October – November since excess rain water flows over cultivated fields because of lack of storage structures. Now we are relieved” adds Mr Sudhakar, another farmer.

“We are benefited not only by water saving but also by protection of fertile top soil, which is key to productivity. NAF provides technological support in the form of soil fertility management, good agriculture practices, agro enterprises like dairying, vermicompost etc. This helps us improve the productivity of crops like groundnut, vegetables, paddy etc by about 25 – 30 per cent on an average” Mr Jothi summed up.

“We have identified three more such watersheds in the adjoining areas of Chitamur block of Kancheepuram district. covering 15 more villages in an area of 4,000 hectares.

“This would benefit 2,500 families with a population of 10,000 people. Apart from this we can also give consultations to those interested and approach us for guidance,” says Brig Raghunathan.

**Founded**

The institution was founded in the year 2000 by late C. Subramaniam, architect of India’s first Green Revolution for implementing grassroots projects to upgrade life of rural people.

The foundation is also equipped with a modern laboratory for soil, food, water and compost/manure testing in near Chennai where quality testing services are available at subsidised rates.

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**Keywords:** National Agro Foundation, good agricultural practices, Nabard Watershed Development Fund, Arasur watershed program, water conservation