

## NATIONAL

Published: June 13, 2016 00:05 IST | Updated: June 13, 2016 08:48 IST DHULE (Maharashtra), June 13, 2016

## Pharma baron helps cure Dhule's drought woes



• [Lalatendu Mishra](#)



A low-cost check-dam built across a minor river near Sutare village in Dhule. —Photo: Special Arrangement

*An NGO's water enhancement campaign is yielding good results, says Collector*

In a summer that was even crueller than usual, when large parts of Maharashtra are still facing severe drought, Dhule, one of the state's poorest districts, still has water in its reservoirs. Where wells in drought-hit districts are down to four per cent, even two per cent water levels, Dhule's wells are at 15 to 20 per cent. Where in some parts of the state, people had to travel far in search of work and sustenance, some of Dhule's farmers have enough water to even plant crops before the monsoon arrived.

Some wells and water sources did run dry, and the district administration did need to send out water tankers, but it was just ten a day. In comparison, Latur and Osmanabad needed 1200 each, Ahmednagar 1000, Beed 900, and Nashik 200.

Dhule is no paradise. It is the sixth-poorest of Maharashtra's 35 districts, and one of the poorest in India. It ranks sixth from the bottom on the Human Development Index (HDI) as well. Out of its just over two million people (as per the 2011 census), or 237,688 families — most of them are of tribal descent — 55.64 per cent are classified as below the poverty line (BPL). The infant mortality rate is 73 per 1000, and it has the highest percentage of girls married below the age of 18 (63.7 per cent). It has the highest rate of dropouts at the seventh class level, and, unsurprisingly, the fifth-lowest number of literates. Nearly 25 per cent of the population resides in kuchha houses. Until a few years ago, summer hit Dhule's people as hard, if not harder than, it did other parts of India's heartland.

Much of the credit for this transformation must go to the Desh Bandhu & Manju Gupta Foundation (DBMGF). Founded by Desh Bandhu Gupta (78), and funded from his personal wealth, DBMGF had, in 2010, committed Rs 100 crore to make Dhule poverty-free by 2020. The plan was to spend Rs 10 crore a year on various projects that would attack the problem from different fronts.

### Grassroots revolution

One of DBMGF's goals is to promote agriculture. To do this, it needed to turn barren land cultivable, which meant ensuring a supply of water throughout the year.

To do this, the foundation spent money on various water management projects: deepening river beds at multiple locations, constructing check-dams — it has, so far, built 163 on six minor rivers — and providing microfinance for the digging of community wells.

But that isn't all. Recognising that what the area requires is a multi-pronged approach, it has devoted funds to land development, natural resource management, the promotion of animal husbandry, and, besides, also funded areas that are not agriculture-related, like skill development for jobs or self-employment and providing micro-finance, and social development, with women empowerment, health and education.

What kind of impact has the foundation had?

"This year the water level at this well has gone down, but still there is enough water," says Nilesh Choudhari "We did not have to go out this year to fetch drinking water!" Nilesh is 16, and has just passed his 10th class examinations with 59 per cent marks. His family is part of a

group that has benefitted from microfinance for a community well. "But considering the severe drought, our families decided not to go for the third crop this year, as a precaution. More water could have been drawn from the well to water the fields."

For Punya Janya Baris (60) of Sitadipada, who used to be a migrant labourer, the difference has been remarkable. He and his wife, Sonibai Baris, took a loan to buy a Rs 45,000 buffalo from Haryana three years ago to go into the dairy business; he has now repaid his loan and makes a profit of over Rs 60,000 a year. Plus the buffalo has given birth to three calves by now, which will mean more income in the future. "I am happy and can scale up my business if I get more financial assistance," he told The Hindu. "The number of cattle inside my shed is increasing and I need to expand. The first calf is now about to deliver a calf of her own."

Another former migrant labourer in Sitadipada, Jasvant Baris (36), has also turned into a dairy farmer thanks to financial assistance augmented by the foundation. He says that before that, the people in his village did not even know how to milk cattle: "When we bought 16 buffalos from Haryana, we got someone from there to train us. Now we are doing it with ease. Currently, I am into milk business and cultivation. Earlier I used to go out of the state for work. Now I am earning a profit of Rs 6000 a month. My son is going to English medium school and family is happy. All this is due to Mr Gupta's efforts."

Like both these people from the tribal community, many of Dhule's residents would spend at least parts of their year searching for work elsewhere: in Gujarat as contract labourers, or in neighbouring Nashik to work in onion fields. Most of that migrant labour force are now finding employment in their villages, or working for themselves, in farming or animal husbandry.

Vasant Bhiram (41) has also achieved a measure of comparative prosperity. He used to grow two crops of wheat on his three-acre plot in Sutare; now has diversified into growing ginger, a first by any farmer in this region. He took the plunge because of a low-cost check-dam built near his field, which will ensure him a constant supply of water through lift irrigation. "Earlier I was growing two crops, now I am doing three. This time I am growing ginger and have invested Rs 28,000. If all goes well I will earn Rs 3 to 4 lakh from this crop. I will utilise the profit in land improvement and increase my farm holding."

### More than water

Currently, DBMGF operates in 645 out of the 681 villages in Dhule's four blocks. And it's not just the people in those villages who have good things to say about them.

"They are doing a remarkable job here," says Annasaheb Misal, District Collector. "They are into soil and water conservation, poverty alleviation and also addressing social issues. Their priority for Jalayukta Shiwar Abhiyan [water enhancement campaign] is yielding good result. The target people are from tribal families and their standard of living is going up, their family income is on the rise. And considering the scale and speed of the execution of the project, I am hopeful that the target will be achieved in two years, well before 2020."

Mr Misal said that while the foundation was helping middle-aged people with interventions in agriculture or animal husbandry, it was also providing skill development and employment for jobless youth, giving children computer education and empowering women through self-help groups. It was also meeting healthcare needs.

"What is important is that efforts have been made by the foundation for economic uplift of the people on a sustainable basis through small economic interventions like mango plantation, bee-keeping and dairy development. They are targeting to upscale the lives of people from all angles," Mr Misal said, "Here is a convergence of the efforts by the state government and the NGO which is making the difference. We are working together to achieve a common cause: that is to eradicate poverty, and that will be a good success story."

The Collector quoted the example of the Kabarya Khadak dam on the Kan river at Gartad village. The dam had been leaking for years, resulting in water loss. The irrigation department had given an estimate of Rs 36 lakh to repair it. But at the instruction of the Collector, DBMGF did the job with an investment of below Rs 15 lakh from their own funds. "That work was executed in record time last year in June and a huge amount of water was prevented from being drained away. This helped farmers in a great way. This year we expect similar benefits," Mr Misal said.

### The numbers

As per data provided by the foundation, it has targeted 130,079 families, and has thus far been able to improve the incomes of 73,404 families, a figure endorsed by the district administration. The break-up: • Agricultural intervention: 46,551 families • Animal husbandry: 5,400 families • Water resource development: 9,224 families • Non-farm sector: 6,415 families • Empowerment of women: 6,014 families.

The rise in incomes, the foundation says, may not show in the government records yet. Partly this is because people classified as below the poverty line want to continue availing of government benefits and schemes. To a certain extent, that will change too. In an initiative of the district administration, in collaboration with another foundation, Bharat Rural Livelihood Foundation, DBMGF is tracking the socio-economic development of 6000 tribal families in Dhule. Their report will be submitted to the government after five years. The expectation is that then most of the people being tracked will be moved up from the BPL list.

As of now, DBMGF has spent Rs 50 crore in Dhule. The money has gone towards constructing check dams in six small rivers, healthcare, education, and providing employment. Now that DBMGF has achieved success and momentum, Mr Gupta has upped the annual spend: he has sanctioned Rs 15 crore for 2016, as its various projects are expected to be completed in 2018, two years ahead of schedule.

Aside from Mr Gupta's own money, the foundation is also mobilising funds from other sources, like NABARD, SIDBI, and central and state government schemes.

### Why Dhule?

Desh Bandhu Gupta, a Mumbai-based entrepreneur, founder and chairman of pharma company Lupin, is India's tenth richest man, and #233 on the Forbes rich list. A self-made man, his personal fortune is around \$4.7 billion. His business empire has spread across the globe, and Lupin closed FY 16 with a turnover of Rs 11,280 crore and net profit of Rs 2,885 crore.

Mr Gupta and his family have no familial ties to Dhule, no business interests there, no factory or facility, not even a large existing consumer base. Why, then, had the family decided to choose Dhule as the recipient of his philanthropy? The Hindu sought a meeting with Mr Gupta, but he has been unwell.

DBMGF's chief programme manager, Raosaheb Badhe, said that Dhule was selected because it has a high incidence of poverty, with a majority of the population classified as BPL, but had a comparatively small population (1.83 per cent of the state), so a targeted project implementation could be achieved.

Mr Sitaram Gupta, executive director of DBMGF, said that Mr Gupta's main interest was "the benefit of the country. He firmly believed in the complete transformation of Dhule so that this model could be replicated elsewhere. He readily committed Rs 100 crore of his personal money as he believed in faster development. He used to say money could be raised from the govt. and several sources, but the foundation of the programme has to be solid. Money should not come on the way of progress. Today he takes active interest in knowing the progress of the project and wants what more could be done."

Desh Bandhu Gupta has never visited Dhule himself. If he did, he could be sure of a rapturous welcome.

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Printable version | Jun 13, 2016 11:51:28 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pharma-baron-helps-cure-dhules-drought-woes/article8721391.ece>

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