

Jalabandhus: Friends of Water Ensuring Water Flows Forever

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Introduction

As a major source of drinking water, hand pumps are ubiquitous in rural India. According to the 2011 Census¹, about 44 percent of rural households in India reported hand pumps as their main source of water. Overall, across the country, there has been a notable shift from unimproved to improved sources, including piped water supply and hand pumps, since the government of India launched the National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) in 2009. On August 15, 2019, the Honorable Prime Minister of India announced the Jal Jeevan Mission. Conceived as a people's mission at the grassroots level for a unified goal of sustainable water supply management, the next five years (2019-2024) are set to witness unprecedented engagement from communities and people from all walks of life.

The Jal Jeevan Mission has an ambitious goal of providing safe and sustainable drinking water to every rural household of India. One notable feature of the Jal Jeevan Mission is in its tagline #JanShakti4JalShakti (a people's movement) and its commitment to the operation and management (O&M), i.e. functionality, subsequent repair, replacement and preventive maintenance of water supply systems.

Maintaining water points is crucial to ensuring that people can access water for their daily needs and sustenance. Water For People spearheaded the Jalabandhu initiative in South 24 Parganas in West Bengal in 2009 after annual monitoring data revealed that a large number of hand pumps were defunct or in poor working condition. During breakdowns that lasted on average between 10 to 15 days, many families resorted to unsafe water sources. In some cases, the community abandoned these sources permanently. A World Water Corps study also found that some of the water points experienced downtime of up to 40 to 50 days. Lack of skilled mechanics in the community, high cost of repairs and difficulty obtaining spare parts were cited as some of the reasons for the prolonged downtime.

In response, Water For People created Jalabandhu, which translates to 'friend of water' in Bengali, to address the operational and management gaps with the following objectives:

1. Maintain hand pumps and water supply schemes to ensure continuous access to safe water.
2. Reduce downtime to repair or replace non-functioning water points by ensuring availability of skilled hand pump mechanics in the community.
3. Professionalize and create business opportunities for local individuals by not only providing training and repair kits but also connecting them to the water point governing bodies for sustained work.

For an initiative that started small in South 24 Parganas in 2009, there are now 71 Jalabandhus in West Bengal and 57 in Bihar actively responding to O&M requests from the communities that they serve.

¹ <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/DigitalLibrary/MFTableSeries.aspx>

History

Water For People conceptualized Jalabandhu in 2008 with its implementation commencing in 2009 in South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal. The first cohort of 55 Jalabandhus received a 5-day training with regular follow-ups with the Water For People field team. The graduating Jalabandhus were also connected to Water User Committees (WUCs), who would formally procure their services.



Each Jalabandhu was responsible for approximately 70-200 hand pumps. Of the 55 Jalabandhus from the first cohort, 27 are active to this day. In addition to providing indispensable services to their community, some have succeeded in expanding their business to other communities and private clients. In 2012, with funding from the government, another cohort of 55 Jalabandhus were trained to cover 5 blocks in South 24 Parganas.

In 2012-13, Water For People expanded its WASH program to Sheohar District in Bihar. The infrastructure or hardware component of the program was complemented with the recruitment and training of local Jalabandhus. In total, 106 Jalabandhus in Sheohar were trained on repair and maintenance of commonly used handpumps and were supplied with basic toolkits. Similar to the approach used in West Bengal, each Jalabandhu in Sheohar was linked to a WUC and its respective water point. Since then, an additional 114 Jalabandhus have been trained as Jalabandhus in the area. Their earnings ranged from INR 3000 to 8000 per month. Water For People plans to train Jalabandhus on the installation and maintenance of piped water schemes in the coming years.

The Jalabandhu initiative has a monitoring component that helps document Jalabandhus' progress as well as programmatic gaps and needs. Every two months, Jalabandhus' work is reviewed at block level meetings. The review process, which includes assessment of the repair work and the time taken to restore water points, helps provide feedback to Jalabandhus. Additionally, the Jalabandhus are given the opportunity to share their experiences with the community at these meetings. Based on the community's assessment and the experiences of the Jalabandhus, Water For People's implementing partners decide whether additional training or handholding is needed.

With continuous support from Water For People and direct engagement with the community, the Jalabandhus now form a strong and independent network of professional mechanics who play a vital role in making sure that a water point is functional at all times. Since the inception of the initiative, the average downtime of hand pumps has reduced from 10-15 days to 3-5 days.

Despite initial challenges of retention due to low pay, Jalabandhus continue to move forward, adapting to changing environments. For instance, when Water For People adopted a Gram Panchayat (GP) based approach to programming, Jalabandhus were seamlessly integrated into the revised strategy. As a result, one Jalabandhu was assigned to every GP comprising of approximately 8-10 villages. They were also provided with specialized training and a standard specialized set of tools on a cost sharing basis (80% of costs covered by Water For People and 20% by Jalabandhus). Additionally, many Jalabandhus have expanded their work portfolio by starting partnerships with civil society organizations and private clients and pursuing government contracts.

A Demand-driven Approach

Since the 1980s, the Government of India has made significant efforts to provide the rural population with clean and sustained water supply under various initiatives, including National Drinking Water Mission (1986), which was renewed as Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission in 1999, and the formation of a Department of Drinking Water Supply in 1999, followed by the upgraded Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation in 2011. The more recent 12th Five-Year Plan (2012-2017) under NRDWP is one of the most ambitious and comprehensive efforts yet. The Plan sought to make safe water accessible to all rural habitations, government schools, and anganwadis, and make potable water accessible to 50 percent of rural population and 35 percent of rural households.² However, according to a recent assessment, the Plan has fallen short of the target due to many technical and logistical challenges. One of the roadblocks reported was ineffective operation and maintenance leading to non-functional schemes.

Despite setbacks, the NRDWP initiative underscored the importance of O&M, and Jalabandhu can play a pivotal role in ensuring that the government's investment in water points is not wasted. The national government's increasing focus on the management of water points creates sustained demand for skilled water point technicians. As such, the Jalabandhu initiative aligns effectively with such a strategy and the Jalabandhu are well-positioned to support. As a demand-driven enterprise, the Jalabandhu initiative functions as follows:

1. When a hand pump is out of order, the WUC responsible for O&M of the water point contacts the associated Jalabandhu, whose name and contact information are displayed at the site.
2. The Jalabandhu, equipped with the spare parts and tools, responds immediately to the service request.
3. The WUC then makes the payment for repair or maintenance.

Additionally, some Jalabandhus work closely with the GPs and their Village Water and Sanitation Committees to respond to their service needs. Jalabandhus are also often called upon to repair private water points.

The Jalabandhu's skill set is ever expanding and in demand for various kinds of work. They perform minor repair work such as chain fittings and replacement of hand pump parts, as well as complex tasks such as repair of machinery underground, including cylinder repair, pipe replacement, connecting and fitting rods and changing washers. In addition to repairing hand pumps, some Jalabandhus have also been trained for plumbing and pipeline work.

What's next?

The Jalabandhu initiative has come a long way and continues to evolve in response to changing demands and opportunities. Below are some of the ways the Jalabandhu initiative could expand its engagement with both private and public entities as well as market forces to make a bigger impact moving forward.

1. Business opportunities with projects of the Government of India: The Jalabandhu program is well-poised to capitalize on the various national and state drinking water initiatives. For instance, the Jal Jeevan Mission aims to ensure sustained piped water supply to rural communities, and this includes training of local water infrastructure technicians in its programming. The Jalabandhus can potentially tap into this scheme to not only expand their skill set to cover piped systems, but also to pursue contractual opportunities to provide routine service to the government. In the past, Water For People

² <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/india/cag-govt-failed-to-achieve-rural-drinking-water-scheme-target.html>

and GPs have assisted some Jalabandhus in West Bengal and Bihar in obtaining trade licenses and applying for large government contracts.

2. Interface with Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA): The MGNREGA scheme was enacted in 2005 to address widespread unemployment and enhance livelihood security in rural India. Under MGNREGA, adults in rural areas are guaranteed 100 days of decent employment with minimum wage pay if they agree to engage in public work, which may include unskilled manual jobs for government projects. This scheme can potentially create a sustainable source of income for the Jalabandhus for the work that they are already doing. Additionally, the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), a public-private partnership company, provides vocational trainings, networking opportunities with the private sector, and loans to establish businesses. Both MGNREGA and NSDC are potential platforms to further expand and strengthen the Jalabandhu initiative.
3. Build on the sanitation market supply chain: The spare parts and tools needed for hand pump repair are not always readily available in the local market, which contributes to prolonged downtime of water points. Water For People is actively working toward creating a viable and robust sanitation market in Sheohar by supporting Points of Purchase (PoPs) for sanitation. The Jalabandhu initiative can take advantage of the established supply chain for the sanitation market and have the PoPs sell spare parts of handpumps in their stores. Water For People is currently working toward linking 12 PoPs in Sheohar and 72 PoPs in Muzaffarpur to the local Jalabandhus.
4. Women empowerment: Women are encouraged to train as Jalabandhus in the communities where Water For People works. Such effort has a cascading effect and contributes to community development through employment and empowerment of women. As such, the Jalabandhu program can empower local women to take ownership of the water resources in their respective communities, work closely with WUCs, and generate an income to support their families. The MGNREGA scheme prioritizes women's economic participation, social equity, and green jobs, and women Jalabandhus may be the perfect fit for the scheme.

A Success Story

Rina Paik Mondal, a college graduate and homemaker from Bapuji GP in South 24 Parganas (West Bengal), is an enthusiastic and enterprising Jalabandhu. Even before becoming a Jalabandhu, Rina always found ways to engage in community work – one could find her advocating for important social issues with the local government or leading self-help groups. So, when Water For People started recruiting Jalabandhus in her village, she was eager to join the cadre of the hand pump mechanics. Being a married woman with children did not deter her from taking on a “man’s job.” Once she completed the initial training and received a set of hand pump repair tools along with promotional materials such as banners and flexes from Water For People, she was ready to start working.

Her personable demeanor, high quality skill set, and excellent rapport with the community members quickly catapulted her to prominence. Soon she started receiving



more maintenance and repair requests than she could handle. She reached out to other Jalabandhus and recruited local youth to form a team of 5 people to respond to service requests. She rented a van to carry tools and gradually started building up her business. In addition to repair and maintenance tasks, she mobilized the local communities through water and hygiene awareness camps and encouraged them to form WUCs. With the average downtime for hand pumps in their communities recorded at just 1.5 -2 days, her team proved to be incredibly efficient.

As the demand for her services further increased, she started an account with the Block Development Office, which would formally pay for her service. At the end of 2013, she was issued a check of INR 92,000 for the work order her team completed over the last 6 months. Next, she applied for trading and government contracting licenses that would allow her to pursue bigger contracts. With a team of 15 workers in 2014, her business that started small continues to grow. She now manages repair and installation orders from other Blocks and Gram Panchayats as well.

With Water For People's training and tools, Rina started her enterprise as a Jalabandhu. What made her endeavor a success are her passion and dedication to her community's development. Moreover, Rina was able to support her family with her work. She can invest in her daughters' future as well as her husband's computer center business. Both her future as well as her community's water supply are now more secure.