

Struggles of the Bhil Indigenous People in Jhabua for Access to Water

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In April '06 hundreds of Bhil adivasi indigenous people under the banner of *Lok Jagriti Manch* sat in a dharna in Bhopal demanding that the unjust recovery of loans advanced to them by financial institutions for lift irrigation schemes that had failed due to no fault of their own be stopped. They said they had proof to support their claim that the lift irrigation schemes had been based on faulty water resource planning arising from treating water not as a source of life as the Bhils had done for ages but as a source of profit. Eventually after ten days the Govt of Madhya Pradesh partially yielded to their demands staying the recovery of the loans and a detailed investigation into their claims was ordered. Indeed globally the commoditisation of water has led to the problem of serious water scarcity, which is becoming more acute with time. Under the circumstances the innovative ways in which the Bhil adivasis in Jhabua have fought this deleterious process are worthy of a study.

Background The district of Jhabua in the south-western corner of Madhya Pradesh is home to the Bhil adivasi or indigenous people with the various sub-tribes like Bhil, Bhilala, Patelia and Mankar together constituting 86.8 % of the total population (Census, 2001). The district forms a unique agro-climatic zone called the Jhabua Hills in the southern part where it is part of the Vindhya hill ranges and drains into the River Narmada. The northern part of the district forms the undulating hilly edge of the Malwa Plateau and the eponymous agro-climatic zone and drains into the River Mahi. The top soils are mostly light and lateritic with some fertile patches of the medium black variety. The underlying rock structure is mostly archaean igneous with some hard rock, deccan trap basaltic and sedimentary formations in patches. The first two formations have low primary porosity and permeability and so the groundwater aquifers have poor water retention capacity. While the deccan trap and sedimentary formations are better aquifers they are few and far between (GOMP, 2002). Thus the terrain and the underlying geological structure together result in most of the average annual rainfall of 829 mm running off during the monsoons and consequently the net groundwater availability is 519 million cubic meters (MCM) per year.

Traditionally the Bhils lived by practising shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering in the dense forests that used to cover the terrain. A combination of the reduction of the fertility of their farms and epidemics would cause them to move every few years to new

locations. Living at subsistence levels and being heavily dependent on physical labour they had no alternative to being integrated into tightly knit communities by customs of labour pooling in most aspects of their material and cultural life. The egalitarianism of the Bhils, apart from the usual patriarchal aberration, was further ensured by customs that decreed that surpluses accumulated

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beyond a certain limit be spent on communal merrymaking and feasting. This also did away with the possibility of these surpluses being used to develop agricultural and artisanal production and engage in trade and further accumulation and so protected the environment from over exploitation. This aversion

to trade also meant that they eschewed the abstractions of literacy and numeracy and remained firmly down to earth and developed a rich oral animistic culture with nature at its centre. Thus there was no commercial value attached to natural resources and especially water. The terrain and the kind of agriculture they practised discouraged the development of irrigation. Nevertheless using their own ingenuity the Bhils developed a unique irrigation system that involved the construction of temporary weirs on the hilly streams and then the diversion of water into channels with lesser gradients that over a distance of a few kilometres brought the water into their small farms by gravity.

Independence in 1947 brought in massive changes into this subsistence livelihood of the Bhils of western Madhya Pradesh. From 1949 onwards a process of land settlement was started with the aim of stopping shifting cultivation. The state of Madhya Pradesh was formed in 1956 from an assortment of former princely states and British administered areas in the central Indian region that were left unclaimed by the other more articulate linguistic sub-nationalities. The Indian Forest Act 1927 was then extended to the adivasi areas in Jhabua which had formerly been out of its purview being ruled by minor princely states. The act was strictly enforced totally stopping shifting cultivation. The forests began to be worked for fuel and timber for the development of industrial and urban centres in Western India. Timber contractors in collusion with corrupt Forest Department staff began indiscriminately decimating the forests. This put the adivasis in a difficult position. They could not shift to newer locations any more as the fertility of the soils decreased and simultaneously the massive deforestation meant that the supplementary income and nourishment from minor forest produce also went down.

The destruction of the Bhils' agricultural base and their loss of control over the crucial natural resources of land, water and forests in the western Madhya Pradesh in fact, have a long history. Under pressure from the Mughals and the Rajputs from the sixteenth century onwards they had first to give up the more fertile lands of the Malwa plateau and Nimar plains bordering the lower Narmada river valley and recede into the forested hills to cultivate sub-optimal lands. This process gained in momentum with the increase in trade and settled agriculture as more and more forests on the plains were cleared and brought under the plough.

The British accelerated this transformation by laying railway lines from the decade of the 1860s and thus opening up these areas further to trade and the penetration by sahumars or moneylender traders who also doubled as tax collectors into the remotest regions. The loss of access to forests and agricultural lands, the burden of heavy taxes and the exploitation of the sahumars had destituted the Bhils even prior to independence.

Following on the national policy in this regard the concentration of govt finances after independence on industrialisation and the promotion of green revolution agriculture on the more fertile lands belonging to non-advansi farmers in the river valleys to the neglect of the much wider dryland areas of the Bhils in the upper watersheds has further skewed the resource access pattern of the region against them. The benefits of the green revolution were cornered by the sahumars, who traded in the inputs and the increased output and also made super profits from lending at usurious interest rates. The large farmers too benefited immensely by earning huge surpluses from low production costs due to state subsidised supply of inputs and the use of their extra-economic powers over the advansis to keep wage levels depressed. The lack of state support for research and development of indigenous crops suitable to the harsh topographies of the Bhil homelands has further weakened their economic base. Thus the Bhil advansis have remained in the clutches of sahumars who dominate the rural markets of the region exploiting the former through un-remunerative prices for their produce, exorbitant prices for the agricultural inputs and usurious interest rates on loans advanced to them. Consequently most of the Bhil advansi peasants have to rely on migration either permanent or seasonal to make ends meet. This in turn means that their labour which is the

only asset that they have and which was previously being used on their farms is now being expended in building the assets of other people in other areas which are already better developed adding to the injustice to the Bhils.

Moreover, motorised Lift Irrigation Schemes (LIS) have been implemented on a large scale, ostensibly to make up for this injustice, with scant regard as to the sustained availability of water in streams and rivulets given the heavily deforested condition of the area. The sustained availability of adequate electric power to run the motors was also not considered. This short sightedness with regard to the future availability of water and power has led to these schemes having boomeranged adding further misery to the precarious livelihoods of the Bhils.

The most glaring failure of planning has taken place in the sphere of the management of water resources. The proper way to go about managing the surface and sub-surface water flows in a river basin, especially in dry land areas is to start from the ridges of the topmost micro-watersheds that constitute the catchment of the river and then work down to the river itself. It is economically much cheaper, socially more

just and environmentally much safer to do this than build big dams, which should only be constructed if necessary to service the needs that cannot be met through in situ water conservation and extraction. Instead two large dams have been planned and are under construction on the rivers Narmada and Mahi, which will serve the non-advansi people in control of the plains lands leaving the advansis literally high and dry. Moreover, motorised Lift Irrigation Schemes (LIS) have been implemented on a large scale, ostensibly to make up for this injustice, with scant regard as to the sustained availability of water in streams and rivulets given the heavily deforested condition of the area. The sustained availability of adequate electric power to run the motors was also not considered. This short sightedness with regard to the future availability of water and power has led to these schemes having boomeranged adding further misery to the precarious livelihoods of the Bhils. It is these schemes, which underline the marginalisation of the Bhil advansis that are the subject of the present study.

Community Lift Irrigation Schemes There was a review in 1975 of the general failure of development in advansi areas all over the country similar to that in the Bhil homeland after which the Central Govt introduced a new Tribal Sub Plan under which special programmes were started in the three crucial sectors of agricultural development, education and health. The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development was constituted in 1982 to give a thrust to rural development and a new Integrated Rural Development Programme was started to give subsidised loans to families living below the poverty line to start some income generating activity. A new scheme was started under this programme in Jhabua district in 1989 to improve the agriculture of the advansis through enhanced irrigation facilities.

The scheme was kicked off in the southern Alirajpur Tehsil of Jhabua district and high power motors and accessories like pipelines were made available to draw water from streams and rivers on a community basis. The expenses of taking water from streams and rivers to farms situated at a distance are relatively more than the economic capacity of an individual adivasi and so he is not able to avail of irrigation. That is why the loans available to individual adivasis under IRDP were pooled together and community lift irrigation schemes were started. It was also thought that this would lead to an increase in the cooperative endeavour among the adivasis. The initial success of the scheme led to the district administration pushing the scheme on a large scale throughout the district. This is what led to the scheme being implemented in all the other tehsils. A decade after the implementation of the schemes it became clear that while there has been some successes most of them have been failures. The adivasi members of the unsuccessful schemes now have a heavy debt burden on their shoulders. The Damocles sword of repayment of their huge debts, failing which forfeit of their minimal land hangs over their heads.

Objective of Study Given the vast socio-economic and cultural gulf between the adivasis and the modern system it was inevitable that they would suffer rather than gain from modern development. Provisions had consequently been made in the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution that the Governor of a state can with the advice of the Tribal Advisory Council consisting of adivasi Members of the Legislative Assembly prevent the implementation of laws and development policies being followed in the rest of the country in the adivasi majority areas notified under this schedule and prepare special laws and plans for these areas. But the irony is that this hasn't been done and so like in other Fifth Schedule areas of the country in Jhabua too the Bhiils are alienated from their traditional resource bases and lifestyle and are also bereft of the facilities and resources required for modern development.

In Madhya Pradesh it had become clear very early that the adivasis were not being able to benefit from the loans advanced to them under various schemes because their planning and implementation were faulty. This in fact has been a major cause of failure of the IRDP all over the country. So in 1979 the MP Determination of Liability Rules were framed by the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes Welfare Department of the Govt of MP to be applicable in the Fifth Schedule adivasi areas and it was acknowledged that - "Till the adivasis do not become familiar with the formalities and complexities of the working of the

economic system it is necessary to protect them from unknown and unwarranted liabilities and there is a need to institute a higher level system for resolution of disputes regarding such liabilities between the simple adivasis and powerful financial institutions". Under these rules a procedure was established such that if it could be established conclusively that the adivasis are not responsible for the failure of the schemes then they would be freed from the liability of repaying the loans as a measure of social justice.

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Several mass organisations of the Bhil adivasis had been agitating against various issues regarding their deprivation and marginalisation in Jhabua district from the early 1980s including in the form of the

long drawn battle conducted by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam on the River Narmada.

The move by the administration to recover the dues on the failed LIS in gross violation of the laws and policies detailed above came as the last straw in a long line of illegalities and injustices committed against the adivasis. The Lok Jagriti Manch held a series of group meetings in villages throughout the district in 2003 to find out the real reasons for the failure of the LIS. These group meetings revealed that the main factors behind the failure of the schemes were:

1. The streams and even the Mahi River, which were the main water sources had dried up after a few years in the crucial winter season when irrigation is most required because of the large number of LIS that came up on them. So most of the schemes had not worked after the first year or two.
2. The power supply to the motor pumps was highly irregular and of so low a voltage that the high power pumps either would not run at all or would get burnt out.
3. Qualified engineers of the Govt had not designed the schemes and instead the materials had been supplied on an ad hoc basis by the sahuikars who had come to the villages and got the villagers together to apply for the scheme. The sahuikars did all the paperwork and running around and handled all the money in cahoots with the loan advancing banks and the govt officials. Thus the materials supplied were ill designed and of an inferior quality.
4. The loans that were thrust on the beneficiaries were far greater than their annual incomes and so represented a tremendous financial burden right from the start.

A massive agitation was launched by the Lok Jagriti Manch after this in 2004 with mass rallies being held to try and force the administration to put a moratorium on the debts which were all invalid. However, the administration contested the claims of the mass

organisations and refused to stay the recovery of the loans. The truth of the failure of the schemes due to the negligence and incompetence of the administration put forward by the adivasis in their simple style was not being accepted by the govt. The govt experts said that the truth had to be "proved" through the arcane methods that economists and statisticians adopt. Like in the case of the big dams on the Narmada River where too the protesters under the NBA had to use the methods of economists and engineers to expose the fallacy of the logic of the projects here too the adivasi mass organisations had to become more versatile and double up as economists and statisticians. This is why it became necessary to undertake a "rigorous" study involving systematic data collection through a detailed questionnaire survey and statistical analysis to verify the reasons for the failure of LIS that could conclusively prove whether the adivasis had been responsible for their failure or not. The Lok Jagriti Manch in collaboration with a local developmental NGO Sampark undertook this study. The limitations of time and resources meant that such a study could be carried out in one tehsil and that also only of a sample of schemes. The present study thus had as its objective an investigation into the causes of the success and failure of LIS in Petlawad Tehsil of Jhabua district.

Methodology of Study A total of 81 schemes were implemented in Petlawad Tehsil involving 1721 beneficiaries and a loan cum grant disbursement of Rs 347.63 crores (US\$ 77.25 million). Stratified random sampling was chosen as the most appropriate method of choosing the schemes given the diversity across various selection parameters that needed to be reflected in the study. A sample of nine schemes out of the total of 81 was chosen for deeper study. For this the universe of 81 schemes was divided into three categories in accordance with their size - 28 schemes of beneficiaries numbering 12 or less, 28 schemes of beneficiaries numbering 13 to 20 and 25 schemes with beneficiaries numbering 21 or more. This division according to size was most important because previous experience has shown that the technical and social problems increase with the size in such schemes. Three schemes from each of these categories were chosen. In addition to this the sample was chosen such that the ratio of the successful to failed schemes in the universe was maintained in it, the social caste and income class distribution in the universe was also reflected in it. The different water sources, that is tanks, streams, dug wells were also adequately represented in the sample. There are two successful schemes one of the Bhil adivasis and the other of the backward farmer caste of Patidars and seven unsuccessful ones, which are mostly of Bhil adivasis and some dalits and Banjaras in the sample. There were a total of 279 families who received loans but due to various reasons 18 of them did not respond to the questionnaire survey that was administered and so the analysis has been carried out with the responses of

261 households only. Table 1 gives the characteristics of the sample.

The questionnaire was designed so as to garner information about the following parameters that could influence the performance of the LIS as indicated by the information gathered from the earlier group meetings and was pre-tested before being administered.

- Household characteristics: education, employment, family size.
- Landholding characteristics: size, irrigated land.
- Irrigation sources: streams, tanks or wells
- Cropping pattern
- Income characteristics
- Debt characteristics: type, amount, sources of loans
- The LIS loan characteristics
- Role of the sahuks, govt servants, bank officials

Table 1: Characteristics of the LIS chosen for study

Sl. No.	Name of Village	No. of Beneficiary families	Caste	Status of Scheme
1.	Bhabhrapada	8	Adivasi	Failed
2.	Samli	9	Adivasi	Failed
3.	Kardavad	12	Adivasi	Successful
4.	Kumbhakhedi	13	Adivasi	Failed
5.	Charankotda	11	Adivasi	Failed
		2	Backward Caste	
6.	Kundal Mor	15	Adivasi	Failed
7.	Garwada	21	Adivasi	Failed
8.	Piplipada	47	Adivasi	Failed
		46	Backward Caste	
		1	Upper Caste	
9.	Kodli	76	Backward Caste	Failed
	Total	261	-	-

Table 2: Means of Variables for the 3 types of LIS

Sl. No.	Variable	Gr I : Unsuccessful	Gr II : Successful Adivasi	Gr III : Successful Backward Caste
1.	Household Education Index	1.32	1.34	2.36
2.	Household Size	6.36	5.33	4.47
3.	Hhd. Landholding Size (Ha)	0.95	1.0	1.43
4.	Per cap. Landholding (Ha)	0.2	0.2	0.38
5.	Annual Hhd Income Index	2.92	4.5	5.89
6.	Annual Hhd Debt (Rs)	28886	24800	55857
7.	Annual Debt/Income Ratio	1.73	0.7	0.84
8.	%age of Agricultural loan used for seeds & fertilisers	77.2	50	88.5
9.	% of Agri. loan taken from institutional source	26	50	82
10.	% of Agri. loan taken under institutional schemes	15.8	50	16.7
11.	Land irrigated by LIS (Ha)	0	0.69	0.61
12.	LIS loan/ Annual Inc. Ratio	1.18	0.62	0.34

Preliminary Statistical Analysis The schemes were divided into the three groups of unsuccessful schemes, the successful adivasi scheme in village Kardavad and the successful backward caste scheme in village Kodli

so as to control for caste as a factor in the success or failure of the schemes while computing the basic statistics like means, frequencies and standard deviations of the many variables. There were 198 variables from the questionnaire and for the purposes of analysis another 31 variables were computed from them. The means for the variables mentioned above for the three groups are given in Table 2 below.

The household education index is obviously much better for Gr III but since Gr II has also been successful despite having a low education index therefore education cannot be taken as a direct factor of success in the present case. However since it has been established from many other studies that the status of education does in general affect developmental performance it has been included as a predictor for regression modelling. There are differences in household landholding and per capita landholding between Gr III on the one hand and Gr II and Gr I on the other but once again since Gr II has succeeded despite having much lesser landholding than Gr III indicates that this is not a major factor of success. Moreover even the average household landholding for Gr III is that of the marginal farmers having below 2 ha.

To get the true picture of the economic status of the households a new variable was calculated as Annual Debt to Annual Income ratio. This variable shows clearly that while Gr III is badly indebted, Gr II is in fact the best positioned despite having a much lower income index than Gr III because its debt is comparatively much less. Thus this is definitely an important factor affecting the success of the LIS as higher debt to income ratio obviously prevents a household from managing its agriculture efficiently. In this case the debt due to LIS is more important for analysis. Hence the LIS loan amount to Annual Income ratio has been taken as an independent variable. The share of agricultural loans taken from an institutional source is much better for Gr III and Gr II and reflects their greater access to such cheap and reliable sources of credit and so this too has been an important factor in the success of the schemes and has been included as an independent variable for further analysis. It is interesting to note that for all the groups the share of agricultural loans for the purchase of fertilisers and seeds is very high and this reflects the basic weakness of agriculture in India at present where even big farmers find it difficult to make enough of an income not only to be able to fund their seasonal requirements but also to fund capital investments in improving the productivity of their farms.

Another information set from the questionnaires that has not been mentioned in the table is regarding the people

who played an important part in the planning and implementation of the LIS. The households in Gr I reported that the sahuikars who were also the traders were the main designers and implementers of the schemes whereas for Gr II it was the Sarpanch, the head of the village elected body, and the Bank officials and for Gr III it was the revenue department officials right up to the District Magistrate. It is indeed ironical that the

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adivasis who needed the most help from the higher administration were left to the mercy of the sahuikars while the better-placed non-adivasi peasants were benefited by the supervision of the District Magistrate. Yet another crucial information set is regarding the source of irrigation. Whereas the source for Gr I was either the

Mahi river or some stream the sources for Gr II and Gr III were big tanks built on perennial streams which provided water for the LIS throughout the winter and spring seasons and sometimes into summer. Thus it is clear that these last two variables too are important factors in the success or failure of the scheme.

The Unfinished Battle Even though the study was only of a small sample in one tehsil and so it may not be possible to generalise the results over the whole of Jhabua district, nevertheless this household survey and subsequent statistical analysis of the data garnered by it confirmed the inferences made from the group meetings that had been held earlier regarding the reasons for the failure of the LIS and provided added support to the claim that the Bhil adivasis were not in anyway to blame. Instead the picture that emerges is of a major failure of planning and governance on the part of the Madhya Pradesh Govt. The most serious mistake is in treating water as a commodity for commercial exploitation rather than as a scarce resource to be properly husbanded given the hydro-geological characteristics of the area. Thus instead of investing in watershed development and afforestation to improve the recharging of water into aquifers and thus first ensuring that there is enough water available for irrigation and other uses, LIS were sanctioned indiscriminately without any thought being spared as to whether the Mahi River and the streams would have enough water flowing in them to satisfy this heightened demand. Similarly little planning was done with regard to meeting the enhanced demand for electricity. The undulating terrain, high gradient and long distance to the fields from the streams where the intake wells were, meant that the pumps had to be of higher power requiring steady electric supply at a fixed voltage for their operation. The supply of electricity failed to keep pace with demand as more and more LIS were commissioned. Later the Govt made the supply of electricity to pumps of up to 5 hp free resulting in the

installation of many small pumps hiking up electricity demand further leading to poor quality of power, which could not run the high power pumps of the LIS whose users nevertheless had to pay huge electric bills.

The ill effects of this ill planned commoditisation of water were compounded by the socio-economic marginalisation of the Bhils. The limited access of the Bhils to cheap institutional loans, the lack of access to good education and in the specific case of the LIS to good and honest planning and implementation of the schemes which were mostly left to the whims and fancies of the sahuks meant a severe governance failure arising from the general trend of immiserisation of the Bhils since independence. The cynical way in which they were burdened with huge loans without a proper evaluation of their payback potential is itself a criminal mismanagement of scarce financial resources.

Ironically the Govt itself has implemented a comprehensive watershed development programme in Petlawad with funding from the Danish International Development Agency, which has brought about significant improvement in water availability and consequent livelihood security for the Bhils in the project villages at a cost of just Rs 5000 per ha. This is in stark contrast to the Rs 100 000 per ha cost of irrigation by the Mahi River dam if and when it finally comes on stream (WebIndia123.com, 2006). Moreover the water from the Mahi dam would reach only the fields in the valleys which are owned by relatively well off non-advansi farmers whereas the watershed programme has made irrigation possible in the upper watersheds where the advasis reside. Nevertheless the Govt has discontinued this scheme as DANIDA has withdrawn funding after completion of the project while it persists with the building of the dam on the Mahi from its own resources. And to make that possible it insists on recovering the dues for the failed LIS from the advasis, which have failed due to its own faulty planning and implementation. This distorted local political economy has resulted from the continuous commoditisation of water and the marginalisation of the Bhils brought about by the wrong development policies adopted since independence.

The advasi mass organisations were not going to take this lying down. So armed with the encouraging results of the study they once again began pressing for a cancellation of the loan dues on the advasis. This agitation dovetailed into the longstanding one for the

implementation of the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 which had earlier become a reality as a result of a concerted campaign conducted by the National Front for Tribal Self-Rule. This law was passed in accordance with the provision of Article 243M (4) (2) of Part IX of the Constitution that envisages that "Parliament may by law extend the Provisions of this part

to the Scheduled Areas..... subject to such exceptions and modifications as may be specified in such a law". Thus this was the first time that a central law had been amended to accord with the special situation of the indigenous people in the Scheduled Areas keeping in mind the failure of the Governors to implement the enabling provisions of the Fifth Schedule. The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act was amended in 1997 in accordance with PESA

and rules framed for its implementation in 1998. The gram sabha or village council was made the paramount decision making body and so a special local govt system to accord with advasi lifestyle and culture became a legal possibility. Mobilisation had proceeded since then all over the western Madhya Pradesh region to exert pressure on the administration towards implementing these provisions. The fight for justice for the Bhils of Jhabua burdened with the LIS loans became a part of this larger struggle.

This culminated in the sit in organised in Bhopal in April 2006 as the local administration refused to do anything to provide relief to the debtors saying that a decision had to be taken by the State Govt. Even though the recovery of loans has been stopped a final decision on cancelling them altogether and so freeing the debtors and allowing them to take other loans has not yet been taken. Despite an application filed later under the Right to Information Act, 2005 asking the Chief Minister as to what action had been taken by him on his promise to rectify this injustice the only answer received is that the review process is still pending. The main reason for this foot dragging on the part of the Govt is that a cancellation of loans in Jhabua district would result in advasis from all over the state demanding similar cancellations of loans given for equally badly planned and implemented schemes severely denting the resources of the fund strapped State Govt. The rule being that in case of cancellation the State Govt has to reimburse the financial institutions for the loss. Thus the advasis of Jhabua district still face an uphill task in their campaign to bring environmental sanity and socio-economic justice back into development planning and implementation.

As Nathu Gangaram of Piplipada village which has one of the biggest LIS which has never worked because the pipelines were ill designed and burst under the pressure of the water on the first day the scheme was started says, "I had a dug well on my farm and used to irrigate my fields with the help of a diesel pump. The sa hukar came and said that I had to be a part of the scheme as otherwise it would not be passed due to a lack of enough members. I was told I would get a cheap supply of adequate water and would be freed from the cost of buying diesel. They took my thumb imprint and money was taken out of the bank. The pipeline never reached my field and anyway the scheme never ran because the pipes burst on the first day. Now the bank officials come and say they will take my bullocks away."