



Figure 1

RESOLVING WATER CRISIS FOR PROSPEROUS RURAL INDIA



Mangesh Wange
CEO of Swades Foundation

About the Spokesperson

Mangesh Wange, CEO of Swades Foundation, has more than 27 years of General Management experience with P&L responsibility and in leading successful start-ups across multiple sectors and various organizations viz. Farm Inputs (Farm Machinery, Agri-Inputs, Animal Feeds & Micro Information), Retail and Micro Finance. Mangesh has rich experience in strategy formulation & implementation and worked for organic & inorganic growth of businesses. Mangesh started his career in Sales & Distribution with Mahindra Tractors in 1987. He also headed the S&D of Agri Input Business at Godrej Agrovet. He conceptualized and started the modern retail businesses (Aadhaar and Nature's Basket) at Godrej Agrovet Ltd. He has also worked in the Microfinance business at Fullerton India and later for Reuters Market Light at Thomson Reuters.

Water is an essential aspect of human existence, yet water scarcity affects more than 40 percent of the global population (UN, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/water-and-sanitation/>). In India, over 52% of rural households lack access to piped drinking water in their homes (Jal Jeewan Mission, 2021). This long-standing water crisis compromises the holistic progress of our villages and their residents. However, rural women and young girls pay a colossal price battling water scarcity. In this article, I share how rural India's water crisis challenges the prosperity and development

of rural women and children by putting their physical, mental, social, and economic well-being. These are our decade-long learnings from rural Maharashtra.

During my recent visit to Darevadi – a remote village in Nashik, Maharashtra, I met Hausabai Kamlu Gawanda a 56-year-old resident who expressed, “Due to lack of water in our village, women carried heavy water and climbed uphill to the village. Many would faint and many like me developed joint pains at an early age. Due to unclean water, children often fell sick and diarrhea was common in our village

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children.” We are a patriarchal society and fetching drinking water is still a woman’s job. More than 39% of Indian rural women walk up to 5 km to fetch drinking water for their daily needs (Gaon Connection Survey, 2019). This daily drudgery results in joint problems, posture issues, and mental stress for rural women. This toll on their health also hampers their daily routine and time for family and kids. Over 37 million Indians are affected by water—

in rural households’ demands for toilets when they received water in their villages.

Water also has a direct link to the nutritional status of humans. When water doesn’t reach the farms, agricultural produce is affected. Especially in the drought-prone rural areas where villagers rely primarily on agriculture, crop loss also leads to hunger and starvation in rural communities. In addition, households



Figure 2

borne diseases and 15 million children die of diarrhea every year (CBHI (2018) National Health Profile 2018, 13th Issue).

During the pandemic, India also struggled as it was hard for the rural population to practice frequent handwashing in water-scarce areas.

Water is essential for most tasks of our daily life. In the absence of clean water for drinking, washing, bathing, cooking, maintaining good hygiene is not possible for rural people. Poor water and sanitation infrastructure also derail menstrual hygiene for women. As India is also progressing on the goal to provide access to toilets at a household level, water is a necessity to ensure their usage and hygiene. To make India truly free of open defecation and ensure people use toilets, access to water in the house is essential. We witnessed an increase



Figure 3

that depend on farming in water-stressed areas spend less on food resulting in loss of essential nutritional intake. A study in rural India on the impact of draught household food consumption and nutritional intake found that Droughts statistically significantly impact household nutrition as the calorie, protein, and fat intake of rural households fell by at most 1.4 percent. This causes rural households to move away from a balanced diet (Fenella Carpena. 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.06.005>).

When we started our rural empowerment journey in Maharashtra, we insisted on rural women ensure their daughters attend school. However, one of the village women shared “If I let my daughter attend school, who will help me get water for the rest of my children”. We realized that water is the first need for the

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Swades Foundation is a Not for Profit organization focussing on rural empowerment through holistic development impacting over 2,700 villages in rural India. Founded by Ronnie & Zarina Screwvala, the Swades Foundation aims to empower 1 million rural lives every five years, lifting them out of poverty by empowering communities to take charge of their own lives. Swades adopts a model of holistic transformation and works in education, health and nutrition, water, sanitation, and economic development. Its unique 4 E strategy of Engage, Empower, Execute, and Exit truly empowers the community and builds village leadership to take on the mandate of transforming their own village community.



community and if we address that, it will lead the way for other social and economic changes we wish to see in our villages. Today in India, due to lack of water found that 23% of young girls drop out of school in Maharashtra as they reach puberty due to lack of safe sanitation facilities. These young girls then support their mother in carrying water and domestic chores. This vicious cycle continues and impacts generations. I have seen rural women and girls accepting this as their fate. They develop this mindset that they can never get out of this circle (Dignity for her – a report by Dasra, 2015). We have witnessed that supporting rural schools with water and sanitation facilities along with training for handwashing practices resulted in more attendance in schools in Raigad.

Our years of rich experience in the difficult terrain of rural Maharashtra has given us rich learning and confidence that it is absolutely possible to provide safe potable water direct to home sustainably at scale. It is heartening for us to see that the Government of India is ensuring every rural household has access to piped drinking water by 2024. This will help to reduce the multi-fold impact of lack of water on the health, sanitation, and wellbeing of rural Indians. However, this long road cannot be walked by the government alone. To provide water, a collaborative effort from all stakeholders – corporates, gram panchayats, district administration, development partners, corporates, and community members, can contribute in their best capacity to address this water crisis.

