

Villagers welcome Raj Khankari, past president of RC Maple Grove, Minnesota, USA.





Thane Rotarians conserve/reach water to 33 villages

Rasheeda Bhagat

Thanks to a long-standing, sustained partnership between the Rotary Clubs of Thana West, (RID 3142) and Maple Grove, Minnesota, US (RID 5950), a clutch of 33 villages in the talukas of Jawahar, Mokhada and Vikramgad, about 125km from Thane, Mumbai, have water for both irrigating their fields and household use.

Giving details of this project which has been addressing Rotary's multiple areas of focus such as water, health, sanitation and education, past president of the club Sriram Seshan said the club members were happy that their sustained efforts over four years have provided access to water to the people of 33 villages.

"We chose villages with a tribal population as they were facing multiple water problems because some of their needs were already being addressed by Pragati Prathisthan, an NGO working in this region for 50 years, so it understands local needs."

He explains that the 100 villages in this region get good monsoon rain, but due to the hilly terrain, the water flows away and the wells and streams go dry by March every year. "The farmers have small landholding, and lack of water in the summer months restricts their farming,

allowing one kharif crop which is rice and some millets."

When there is no water to irrigate their farms, the farmers migrate to the nearby urban areas along with their entire families in search of menial jobs. "This affects the education of their children and creates unstable family conditions."

Even when water is available in the wells during and immediately after the monsoon season, the wells are far away and to fetch water for their daily household chores and personal use, the women had to trudge 1–2km over a hilly terrain. Hence RC Thana West, some other clubs in Thane and RC Maple Grove came together to alleviate the villagers' misery.

Each village has a zilla parishad school and some villages also have an ashram shala, a day school, run with help of NGOs. The zilla schools have classes till 8th, and after that the students have to find a high school in nearby villages. The cheerful news he gives me is that "many students not only go to a high school in a nearby village, but several of them graduate too. Luckily Pragati

Prathistan's forte is education, health-care and water," he adds.

The partnership between the two RI districts started when in 2019 Raj Khankari was the president-elect of RC Maple Grove and "wanted to do an international project. I was introduced to Shrirang Deshpande from RC Thana West through our sisters who are close friends". As finding a good international partner to execute Rotary projects is always a challenge due to lack of contacts in unfamiliar geographical locations, we "began a collaboration which has grown strong over the last four years through six global grants and one small international district grant."

Giving details of the projects done, RC Thana West president Shrirang Deshpande says the Rotarians concentrated on two types of check dams. The first ones are small check dams that were constructed on the streams and small rivers to hold the water and stop it flowing away to ensure year-long availability of water.

The second type is a sub-surface check dam to serve the wells used by the small landholding farmers. These get water through subsoil streams that

go dry in summer. The solution found, thanks to the expertise of one of their partners, Umesh Mundle, trustee of the Vasundhara Foundation, was to construct a concrete wall right down to the rocky layers existing below the ground surface, thus arresting the flowing away of water brought by underground water streams.

These initiatives have ensured water availability throughout the year and has enabled farmers to take additional crops and/or cash crops like vegetables and fruits. Most important,

their migration to nearby cities in summer months to take up menial jobs has been prevented and this project has improved the overall socioeconomic condition of the villagers, he adds.

A small difference in the concept of check dam and sub check dam is that while a check dam holds water in the water body, the sub check dam prevents rainwater from running away, thus recharging the groundwater and increasing water levels in nearby wells used by farmers for irrigation. This initiative now sees their water needs

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RC Maple Grove



being met during the hitherto difficult summer months.

The additional benefit is that with migration arrested, children can continue their schooling without disruption, says Seshan. On the day we have this conversation for this article, he updates me on the latest water situation. “Last week we completed one of the water conservation projects, and monitored the water levels, only to find that in just one day... only 24 hours... the water level in a nearby well had increased by 11 inches!”

To put an end to the arduous task of fetching water physically from long distances and help women, the Rotarians have brought water to the doorstep of their homes. “Solar powered pumps were provided to bring water close to the village so that it can be stored in large tanks. This water is then filtered and distributed to several points to make clean drinking water available at the village homes,” says Deshpande.

This initiative has proved to be a great boon to the women and teenaged girls; “the women are now able to utilise the time for helping in the farms or supplement the family income. The girls now attend school regularly and concentrate on their studies. Also, due to the availability of clean drinking water, the general health of the villagers has improved significantly,” he adds.

Now with more water being available, these small farmers plan to grow a wider variety of vegetables and also flowers. And there are also plans to

RC Thana West members Prasad Borde, Harshad Mengle and Kedar Vidwans with representatives of Oikos Water Management at a completed check dam at Mokhada.



connect their produce to the much bigger Mumbai wholesale market some 200km away. Seshan explains that the NGO Pragati Prasthan has been monitoring the progress of the projects by the clubs (three other clubs from Thane — RCs Thane Lakecity, Thane Downtown and Thane are also partnering in this water project) and ensures that small maintenance work such as repair of solar pumps, taps or pipeline is done in a timely manner. Each village has a designated account for this maintenance with funds raised by the villagers themselves and the gram panchayats are also on board.

Other voluntary organisations partnering with Rotary in this project are the Blossom Charitable Trust, Shabari Seva Sangh and Gramseva Pratishtan.

During last four years, under this partnership with the US district and a few clubs in Thane, two check dams, 15 sub surface dams and water distribution systems have been constructed. This work has benefitted 11,700 people in 2,099 families in 33 villages.

Seshan explains that in this project, till now four grants have been done; and from 2019, the amount has been going up... from \$30,000 initially to two grants of \$79,000 and \$82,500 in 2020–21 (when he was club president), \$92,000 in 2021–22, \$99,250 in 2022–23, and the next one, which is nearing finalisation will be for \$122,000.

“Even while concentrating on water, for the next grant we are expanding the project scope to include community and economic development.” These projects, he adds, apart from providing water, have also covered literacy and education, healthcare and sanitation, and enhancing livelihoods.

Next the plan is to replace the small plastic pumps which are not





Above: Sriram Seshan, Khankari, Pragati Pratishtan CEO Virendra Champaneker and club president Shirang Deshpande with villagers after inaugurating a sub surface bund in a village.



environmentally friendly that several farmers use, with solar-powered pumps of 5–7.5hp capacity. These will be given to nearly 25 farms, and in these farms drip irrigation will be used.

In October 2023, Khankari came down to India to inaugurate two check dams in two villages where water had been provided at the doorstep of the villagers, bringing huge relief to the women. He also visited the three sub surface dams completed in the earlier years. He inaugurated three water-at-the-doorstep systems in Cherichapada village in Jawahar taluka and Kumbhipada and Nimanipada in Vikramgad taluka.

Khankari says part of the purpose of his India trip was to visit some of the Adivasi villages “and meet the villagers to confirm that they were getting the benefits from our projects. We also visited a site for an upcoming project.” Four years ago, he had met several women from Ramvadi village, including the woman sarpanch to confirm that

there was a need for a water distribution system at their doorstep.

“We met the same woman sarpanch this time. When I asked her if they were happy with the project, the happiness on her face was heartwarming. I also asked her if the girls who were spending a lot of their time in getting water for their families, were going to school now. Her answer was an emphatic yes and that was quite rewarding for me. Such interaction gives us Rotarians more energy and encouragement to do more work,” he told *Rotary News*.

It is challenging to raise funds, he says, but the final outcome is satisfying. And now, with technology allowing the donors to see for themselves visual images of what their contribution has achieved, the trust is established.

“But of course an actual visit is always more convincing. Clubs and members from my district have been very open and generous over the last four years, and some of them visited the project sites with me last year. Their first-hand experience tremendously helped the cause!”



PDG Kailash Jethani (centre) and Khankari (R), along with Rotarians, at a village.

Khankari interacting with villagers in Mokhada.



He is really happy that his quest for “finding reliable and trustworthy partners in the host country, always a challenge for international partners” has met with success. “I have been truly fortunate in finding the clubs of District 3142 and its members; truly dedicated members such as Sriram Seshan. Through RC Thana West, we have also developed relationships with the Rotary clubs of Thane, Thane Uptown, Thane Downtown and Thane Premium.” During the pandemic too they had done a GG where the roles were reversed — RID 3142 was the international partner and RC Maple Grove was the host club. Under this GG PPEs had been given to over 400 health clinics in Minnesota, US.

He adds that he now considers some of the Indian Rotarians his “personal friends. I wonder if this is what Paul Harris had in mind when he founded Rotary! We have successfully completed four additional GGs through collaboration with other clubs of District 3142 too.”



Borde, Deshpande, Khankari, Seshan, Vidwans and Mengle visit a water distribution project at Mokhada.

Designed by N Krishnamurthy