

# Safe Water and Sanitation: A People's Movement in the Bhal Region

## Introduction



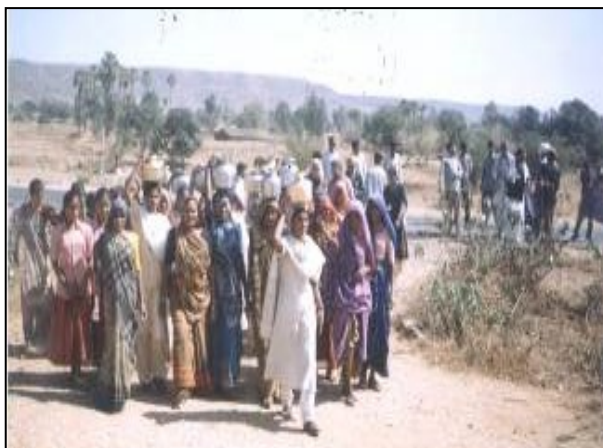
**Mahiti Trust**, rooted in the saline and drought-prone Bhal region of Gujarat, began its journey in 1994 after evolving from an awareness initiative by Utthan. With a name meaning "information" in Gujarati, Mahiti Trust was established to empower rural communities through knowledge, action, and advocacy—particularly in the realm of water and sanitation. The Bhal region, metaphorically compared to the "forehead" of Gujarat due to its

barren, saline landscape, is one of the most underdeveloped areas in the state. With no access to freshwater and poor agricultural productivity, its communities—largely consisting of Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, and minorities—face chronic challenges related to water, health, education, and livelihoods.

## The Challenge and Mahiti Trust's Response



In a region where state-driven, capital-intensive water supply schemes were unsustainable, Mahiti Trust advocated for community-owned, decentralized water resource management. This people-centric approach emphasized rainwater harvesting, surface water storage, and the equitable, participatory management of water resources.



With a firm belief in local knowledge and grassroots mobilization, Mahiti Trust organized women and marginalized groups to lead water security initiatives. Over time, these efforts evolved into a powerful community movement—transforming the region's water landscape and catalyzing social change.

## Community-Led Innovations and Impact



Women-led village water committees became the cornerstone of this transformation. Through collective ownership and participatory planning, they revived traditional systems and introduced innovations such as:

1. **Rainwater Harvesting Plastic-Lined Ponds**
2. **Rooftop Rainwater Harvesting Structures (RRWHS)**
3. **Farm ponds, check dams, percolation tanks, and recharge wells**

**As of today, Mahiti Trust has facilitated the construction of:**

1. **21 rainwater harvesting plastic lined ponds**
2. **Over 8,500+ rooftop rainwater harvesting tanks**
3. **Established in-village water supply system in 90+ villages**

These efforts have drastically reduced dependency on tanker-supplied water, improved health outcomes for women and children, and enabled women to engage in economic activities with greater freedom.

## Health, Sanitation, and Women's Empowerment

Recognizing the interconnectedness of water, health, and gender justice, Mahiti Trust expanded its work into sanitation and primary healthcare. Women were trained as health workers and midwives, while awareness campaigns tackled hygiene, nutrition, and superstitions. Sanitation infrastructure, such as soak pits and women-friendly bathing spaces, improved overall well-being.

This holistic model of development—linking water security with livelihoods, health, and gender empowerment—has led to tangible changes: improved village hygiene, reduced infant mortality, less seasonal migration, and increased food security.

## Scaling Impact and Advocacy

Mahiti Trust's approach is now a model replicated in over **90 villages** across Ahmedabad, Botad and Bhavnagar districts. Through partnerships with WASMO, CSPC, and Tata Trusts, it continues to scale its impact. Mahiti Trust is also part of the PRAVAH network, advocating at state and national levels for decentralized, community-led water and sanitation governance.

## Key Learnings and Vision

- Traditional knowledge, when combined with scientific insight, offers resilient and sustainable solutions.
- Women's leadership transforms development by ensuring inclusivity, equity, and accountability.
- Community ownership and participatory planning are essential for long-term sustainability.
- Hygiene and sanitation practices are deeply rooted in cultural change, not just infrastructure.

***Mahiti Trust remains committed to building a just, eco-sensitive, and self-reliant society—one where even the most marginalized have a voice in shaping their future through collective strength and sustainable solutions.***