

WOMEN LEAD THE WAY: SECURING WATER RIGHTS THROUGH COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

*A Transformative Story from **Raysangadh** Village, Dholera Taluka, Gujarat (1996)*

The Bhal Region: A Land of Struggles and Strength

The Bhal region of Gujarat, spread across parts of four districts, is known for its flat and saline terrain—its name, **Bhal**, meaning "forehead" in the local language. Bordered by the Gulf of Khambhat, this coastal stretch faces harsh realities: salty groundwater, erratic rainfall, deep-rooted caste inequalities, and continuous out-migration. Amidst these tough conditions, everyday survival becomes a challenge—especially for women and marginalized communities.

A Movement Begins: Women's Fight for Water and Dignity

In the heart of this landscape, **Mahiti Trust** took root as a community-based initiative committed to social justice. What began as a conversation around water scarcity evolved into a powerful women-led movement demanding the right to manage local water resources.

At a time when centralized water pipelines were considered the only solution, the women of Bhal, with support from Mahiti Trust, questioned the norm. They successfully advocated for decentralized, village-level solutions—like **plastic-lined ponds and rooftop rainwater harvesting systems**. Their efforts pushed the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board (GWSSB) to approve a pioneering shift in water policy.

This movement did more than just improve access to water—it sparked confidence, collective action, and a new sense of self-worth among women. As they organized to manage resources, they also challenged oppressive social systems, including exploitative moneylending practices, and gained greater control over their lives.

Raysangadh Stand: When Water Was Worth Fighting For

Raysangadh, a village of around 700–800 Koli families, was one of the early adopters of Mahiti Trust's rainwater harvesting model. In 1988, a community-managed, plastic-lined pond was constructed, bringing relief from years of water scarcity.

But in 1996, a crisis unfolded. After a year of good rains, both ponds in Raysangadh were full—unlike those in the nearby village of Cher, inhabited by Powerful & Dominant families who had not participated in Mahiti Trust's efforts. When Cher's residents asked for water, Raysangadh agreed—offering water from the natural pond, with the condition that it be transported responsibly to avoid wastage.

However, Cher's Powerful & Dominant leaders, angered by this cautious approach, used political influence to obtain official permission to draw water from the plastic lined pond. They connected a diesel pump to an old pipeline and began depleting the drinking water source that Raysangadh women had worked so hard to protect.

The response was swift and united. Around **80 women**, many active in local savings and credit groups, came together. They drafted a formal complaint and marched to the block administrator's office. Their demand was clear and firm: stop the misuse and protect their community's water. The administration responded, revoking Cher's access and ordering the removal of the pump.

Empowerment in Action: Women as Stewards of Change

This story from Raysangadh is more than a tale of conflict—it's a testament to the power of women's collective action. By taking ownership of a shared resource, these women demonstrated that community-driven, nonviolent, and rights-based advocacy can create meaningful change.

Their courage and clarity turned a potential flashpoint into a peaceful and legal resolution. Most importantly, they reminded us all that access to water isn't just a basic need—it's a matter of dignity, justice, and self-determination.

Raysangadh's experience is a living example of how empowered communities—led by women—can sustainably manage local resources and resolve conflicts with compassion, unity, and strength. It offers hope and a replicable model for other regions facing similar challenges.

At Mahiti Trust, we believe that water justice begins with community voice—especially women's voices. This story reflects the heart of our mission: enabling communities to own, manage, and protect their resources, with dignity and determination.