



# Wells for India

Bringing water and dignity  
to the poorest people of rural Rajasthan



*Photo of the Thar desert by Dieter Telemans*

**Five stories by co-founder Professor Mary Grey, looking back over 25 years of Wells for India's history**



# Celebrating 25 years

This autumn we celebrate Wells for India's 25th anniversary. Instead of sending out a newsletter, we're taking up the kind offer of Wells for India's co-founder and erstwhile trustee, Professor Mary Grey, to write five stories – one for each five-year period of the organisation's history.

It would have been impossible to mention every project, or every one of our many valued local partner organisations in India, without commissioning a whole book. The aim of these stories is not, therefore, to represent the full breadth of activities undertaken during this past quarter of a century, but rather to provide, through a series of personal reflections, a perspective on the spirit of the organisation, its evolution over the years, and the inspiring, dedicated work carried out by our partners in different areas of rural Rajasthan.

We hope you enjoy this special collection!



*Professor Mary Grey and Dr Nicholas Grey*

## Story 1: 1987-1992

# How the story began

It was 1974 and our family lived in Brussels. It was at a chance Church ecumenical picnic one Sunday that we met Ramsahai Purohit, a slight, thin figure, an interfaith Gandhian activist for peace, who was at that moment travelling around the world trying to persuade leaders to create an army without weapons. His home was in Rajasthan. He was a follower of the famous Gandhian activist, Vinoba Bhave, founder of the land-gift movement, who had walked through the entire country persuading land-owners to give back land to poor people.

Ramsahai himself had walked to Rome from India, been imprisoned by the Italian authorities - but when it was published in the newspapers as, "Gandhi goes to gaol!" he



*Ramsahai Purohit*

was hurriedly released and even befriended by successive Popes!

His commitment to peace and stories of encounters with world leaders soon captivated us and he became our friend: soon Nicholas visited him in Rajasthan in his Peace village near Dudu, where he was trying to put these principles into practice.

Then tragedy struck, personally for him - his wife died the day after their daughter Vijay's wedding – and nationally for India, as the drought of 1987 meant that wells dried up, there was no water, and millions of animals – cattle, sheep and goats – perished throughout the country. There was universal desperation.

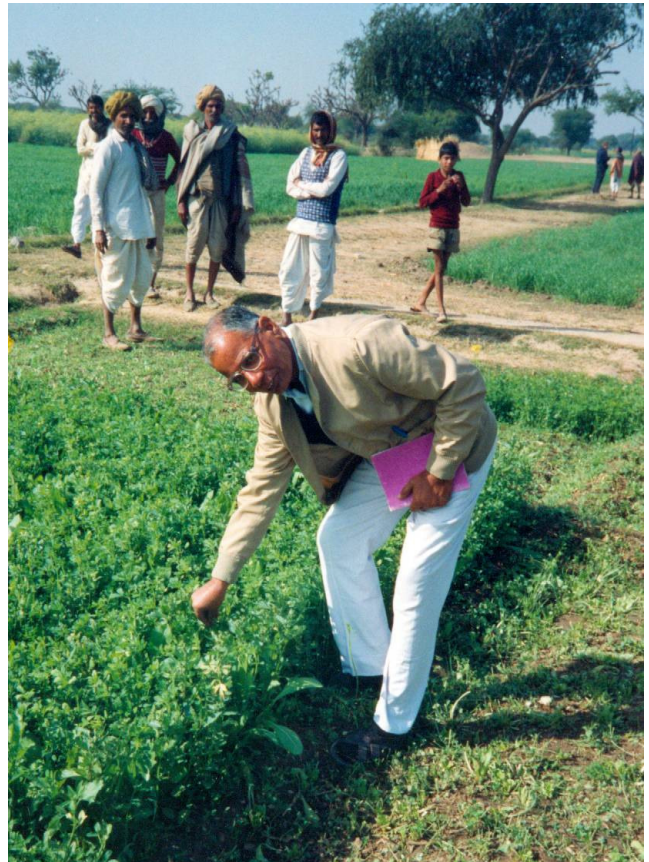
Together, Nicholas and Ramsahai decided that his role was no longer to travel globally but to work with village communities in Rajasthan for water security, for the survival and wellbeing of the village people. Ramsahai resurrected a former Gandhian NGO, Gram Seva Mandal Idankabas (GSMI – Village Self Help Organisation, based originally in the village of Idankabas) – and Nicholas founded Wells for India in the UK, to be the funding support for Ramsahai's and GSMI's efforts.

It is difficult to encapsulate the energy of those early years. We were on a steep learning curve. Objectively, we helped around 90 villages in the Dudu block of Rajasthan – near its capital Jaipur, the “pink city” – with deepening existing wells or digging new ones.

With Ramsahai and his son Vivek we travelled into remote villages. Some were not even on the map for the State Government and we took several officials there. We encountered Sambhar Salt Lake, shimmering in the hot sun in its completely dried up state, vultures hovering over dead animals, and the occasional herd of nilgai (the “blue horse-cow”, dreaded by farmers because they ate everything and no fence was adequate protection).

We encountered levels of poverty that we had not even imagined and learnt that we had to work holistically: to rebuild and reconstruct wells, yes, even the first anicuts

(small water harvesting check dams) that were established here – was merely a first and essential step towards achieving the social change that was so necessary.



What was very moving for groups who began to come from the UK was to see how villages named these wells. A group from our former parish in Wokingham (Berkshire), *Corpus Christi*, was astonished to discover a well they had funded in a remote village near Sambhar Lake, named “*Oceans of Corpus Christi*”!



A GSMI well



Painting of a nilgai (Walters Art Museum)



## Story 2: 1992-1997

# Women at the Well



Project Asha

**The many levels of social change involved with water provision now brought us to an encounter with deeper levels.**

Already we had learnt that women in Rajasthan experience suffering in so many ways, from birth to death, as many say.

Rajasthan is a very conservative state, second in poverty only to Bihar. Women are particularly affected. The girl child is unwanted, because she will marry out of the village: she is a burden until this happens.

Female infanticide is a common occurrence – as is child marriage. Anaemia, poor nutrition, maternal mortality (558 per 100,000), child deaths from poor nutrition and water-related diseases are all interrelated

factors. 80% of all women of child-bearing age in Rajasthan suffer from anaemia; infant deaths are 79/1000; *the maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world* – according to UN figures. Women and girl-children are caught in a cycle of malnutrition – and over the years our work has attempted to address the gravity of this situation principally through water projects.

One day in Dudu, a few women came to the newly-deepened well. These were prostitutes living in “colonies” along the highway that links Mumbai with Delhi. They were mostly “Dalits” or former Untouchable women shunned by the upper caste. These were seeking a better life for their children. But when they tried to put them in the village kindergarten the other parents removed their children.

The women felt trapped in their way of life and pleaded with us to help. We were in a dilemma. Strictly speaking, this was a long way from our mission for water security. Yet, the new well had been the catalyst for the women taking a chance.

*Water and wellbeing* was our motto – how could we refuse?

So, *Project Asha* was born. *Asha* means “hope” in Hindi and the hope for these children was to have another and better life than their mothers. Ramsahai opened his doors and a home for the children was created – for which



Veronica Seddon and I undertook responsibility for policies and funding.

From the beginning we welcomed both girls and boys as it was explained that unless the boys were also educated they would act as pimps for their sisters. The children reacted in a wonderful way to this new opportunity: eventually they were able to be integrated in the local school and academically did very well, even making friends with local children.

But we began to realise the immense difficulties with such a project. The funding was not an issue - plenty of

supporters in the UK were enthusiastic. The children were affectionate and responsive and the mothers grateful - although efforts to re-train them were not successful. It was more the difficulties within India.

When the girls became older and obviously attractive, some were kidnapped and sold in Mumbai. Ramsahai and his team frequently rushed to Mumbai and rescued them.



In 1997 we held a conference on prostitution at the GSMI Centre and were addressed by Jyotsna Chatterjee, the Director of JWP, the Joint Women's Programme in Delhi. She pleaded with us to persevere with this issue - for which the Government itself had no solution.

In the end, after 10 years, the project closed and we had to be glad that at least these children had received a good education. One girl, Soonam, married and herself joined an NGO struggling against prostitution.

We learnt so much from this experience.





## Story 3: 1997-2002

# Pabupura - a Story of Hope



*Dhana Devi and her taanka*

### **By 1995 we had begun to spread our wings with the story of water harvesting.**

Our base in Udaipur, home of Om Prakash Sharma, who would become our India director, took us into the Aravalli Hills, but Nicholas's meeting with Mr and Mrs Tyagi of the NGO, Gravis (Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti), brought us deep into the Thar desert, north of Jodhpur.

Like Ramsahai, Mr Tyagi – Tyagiji, as he is respectfully called – was also a follower of Vinoba Bhave and a dedicated Gandhian.

The method of Gravis has been to reach further into desert areas. Once a Field Centre was built this gave a jumping off point. So, because the Gravis main centre was at Jelu-Gagadi we could reach Balu and began a

water-harvesting project, also constructing the Balu village school – which still flourishes.

A crucial step was now taken: Nicholas and Tyagiji realised the gravity of the coming drought – that also meant famine for people and animals. He and Tyagiji spent hours discussing preventative measures. So, Bap Field Centre was constructed with a special grain store – Nicholas persuaded Catholic Relief Services to supply grain and oil – and also tried to get the EU to understand the gravity of the crisis.

Next a Field Centre was built at Kalron, further north. This meant we could reach the most vulnerable areas in the interior of the Thar Desert.

So we first visited Pabupura in January 2000. The first impression is its remoteness and isolation (now there is an actual road). When we arrived there was no sign of a village – just an endless vista of sand and sand dunes.

There were houses – or wattle and daub huts – but very

often standing alone and distant from other houses. But there were certainly people awaiting us. We sat on the sand and the people told their sad tale of poverty and of being abandoned. The men, forced to migrate for some income, left behind women, the sick, elderly, and the children.



*Women and children (second photo: Dieter Telemans)*

Yet the people of Pabupura had great commitment to their children and had built a small hut to be a school, finding someone to teach them. They told us: "We had nothing but we gave from our stomachs" – meaning they gave the only money that they had for food.

We were all deeply moved. Tyagiji responded, apologised that Gravis had not been involved, and promised that from now on they would work together. "But," he ended, "the most important thing is your own



*Naadi (pond) at Pabupura*

strength and determination: this is the decisive factor".

Wells for India then constructed a school which began also to serve as a community centre.

The next step was to find water! Due to the high saline content of the area the only possibility was to drill 1,000 feet to find "sweet water". There was only one rig in Rajasthan which could do this: but how would it navigate the sandy tracks in the desert?



*Pabupura field centre: then and now*

The men of Pabupura laboured into the darkness spreading twigs over the sand to enable the passage of the dunes. Small fires were lit by the side of the track as the men slept by the path awaiting the coming of the rig.

With great ceremony this well – and the pond nearby – were inaugurated by Professor Mike Edmunds and his wife Kathy to the delight of the villagers. Nothing was spared – garlands, sweets, music and dancing: Chotaramji, the Coordinator, recited a special poem about Pabupura which he had composed.

The next important step was the construction of Pabupura Field Centre – with a generous donation from Caroline Lintott. Thus began the role of Pabupura as the hub for development in surrounding villages.

The initial project focused on water, pond deepening, the creation of Self Help Groups, the construction of taankas – which have become a hallmark of this area, and symbols of hope and self-reliance.

Thus was a tale of despair turned into an ongoing story of hope.



## Story 4: 2002-2007

# Malawari — the village the world forgot



*Malawari*

## Malawari lies high in the Aravalli hills south of Udaipur. Like Pabupura, it was difficult to reach.

Its remoteness was striking – high on a mountain with scattered hamlets accentuating this. Our jeep (2002) approached across vast dried-up riverbeds until we had to leave it and climb the mountain. The setting sun was beautiful – but meant that we reached Malawari as darkness fell. The people of the village had been expecting us since 3pm – and had mostly dispersed.

Malawari looks down on a huge reservoir – from which it gets no benefit. Tragically, the village had to lose its agricultural land – and received inadequate compensation in the form of money. All benefit from the reservoir is experienced by people downstream: Malawari doesn't get a drop.

With our partner GMKS (Gandhi Manav Kalyan Society) and its leader, Madan Nagda, a plan was agreed to capture water for

the village itself. Through the many gully plugs and small check dams catching the water as it ran down the mountain, we could already see many benefits. The people had already been able to get a crop from the land – and the well water level had increased.

The people of Malawari are tribal people speaking the ancient local language, Mewari. Despite the darkness we saw something of their courage and spirit. As we reached the top of the hill, people were already gathering. Musicians and puppeteers appeared out of the darkness and the puppet show was amazing. Lighting was provided by torch flares from hastily gathered brushwood.

The themes emerging from the street theatre, the dancers, the songs and stories were geared to social awareness-raising – self-help groups, saving, health and conflict resolution. But the effect was that hope seemed very much alive. The children looked hungry and thin – but in their laughter were like children the world over: a village was being brought back to life!





I revisited Malawari in 2004 with Madan Nagda's words ringing in my ears:

*"It was like an island... cut off from all the facilities of the modern world."*

How had Malawari fared in the recent drought? The first impression of Malawari was still its remoteness. Yet there were unmistakable signs of water-harvesting everywhere: never have I seen so many gullies so well-plugged, so many small check dams, field bunds, and hundreds of small contour trenches across the hillsides.



*Gully plugs at Malawari*

Healthy winter crops grew in the fields and there was still greenness on the hillsides, now six months after the monsoon.

Under the shade of a banyan tree, the people awaited. Men told how they had benefited from the Drought Mitigation Programme: food and cash for work enabled them to complete the field works. The major point about the water situation was that although the stream beds were dry, ground water recharge meant that there was still water in some wells and that the soil water retention was improving.

A great delight was to meet, amidst the group of sari-clad women, Tammu-bai, who figures in many case-studies from Malawari. Despite her hard life, she is striking and highly spirited. A born leader, she told the story of the Self-Help Group (SHG)'s struggle to open a bank account. The Bank manager was highly suspicious and had refused. So MKS organised a meeting to which the Bank Manager was invited – and thus the Bank account became a reality, the women of the three SHGs saving regularly, for cattle and a diesel pump.

Their husbands said openly that women are better at

saving than men! It was exciting to see the relationship between water harvesting and social progress. The people told us that they used to quarrel over small things, but now are able to resolve their disputes and village unity grows. There is an increasing sense of confidence and self-esteem. For example, frequently teachers do not bother to turn up at the school: but the villagers of Malawari now assert the rights of their children to an education, and we sensed a longing for an improvement of the economic situation so that more children could be sent. The tide slowly turns...

Steadily, progress continued. A later visit noted vermi-composting – which had doubled crop yield – and 102 houses with smokeless fuel stoves. Water-harvesting structures were still steadily being built. The school had a kitchen constructed by the government and the next step would be a new road and electricity. Self-help Groups are working well and migration levels have dropped from 85% to 10%.

Now Malawari has become a model village for others in the watershed.



## Story 5: 2007-2012

# Development as the road to peace

**In these stories I have highlighted the way the search for water security in remote villages has been linked with social change and that holistic development goes hand-in-hand with this.**

One of our partners is RBKS, *Rajasthan Bal Kalyan Samiti*, whose headquarters are in Jhadol. This non-governmental organisation has a strong reputation for education, and its founder, Jeevat Ram Sharma, father of the current director, Girija Shankar Sharma, has won many government awards for his achievements.

RBKS has worked since 1981 in tribal areas of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, known for high anaemia rates, child trafficking, large numbers of orphans, low literacy rates, and high numbers of school dropouts – as well as the problems associated with water scarcity and poor agriculture.

When Nicholas and I first visited we were amazed by the achievements in education among tribal children – up to third level – on their extensive campus. So our contribution in this respect has been to improve sanitation on the campus and



*Boys at Kutamariya village. The bow and arrow are used for hunting and fighting.*



*The roof rainwater harvesting tank at Beeda school*

construct an enormous water-storage tank (2007).

My aim here was to show how our partners have shown courage to go deeper into remote areas that brought them face-to-face with difficult issues.

This happened also with RBKS, who took us into a remote area of the Kotra block of the Aravalli hills, south Rajasthan. Thus in 2010 we visited villages in this block, where RBKS had begun a



new project. (It had only recently been possible to move to the interior because of a newly constructed road.)

Here we encountered communities poorer than we had ever seen. There was no agriculture, water had to be carried from a distance of 5km, and people were constantly hungry. For nine months they ate only a few chapattis a day, for the other three just water and buttermilk. Children went to bed hungry.



This had an effect on relationships, with people constantly in conflict. The police were afraid to come near. In fact the name of one village – Kutamariya – was “They murdered the dog.” Another was “They murdered the sheep”. Medical help was totally absent.

The following year we revisited the region – had anything changed? Certainly in the village of Padlai there was some relief with a new well constructed, and the promise of 1-3 group wells. The anicut had also enabled a good crop of mustard.

But in Kutamariya we did not see any real change either on the water or educational front. 6,000 children are without education – but these figures do not appear on a government census. 17 educational centres are needed.

Are there positive features? At the village meeting the



*Crops growing at Padlai village (2011)*

general cry was “Water!” But the Self-help Groups (SHGs) are working and the women are saving. Secondly, any families who get income from crops do not migrate, but buy grain, seed and diesel oil. Thirdly, there is no money wasted on drink – as there is no money at all!

Fourthly, there has been a toilet constructed at the school using roof-water harvesting, and, lastly, an anicut (masonry dam) will help improve water levels in the wells.

So, even if the children were just as unkempt as the previous year, and the level of conflict has not changed very much, the community seemed to have more hope than in our last visit.

Development is always for the long haul...



*A reconditioned well at Kutamariya village (2011)*



*Professor Mary Grey is co-founder and a former trustee of Wells for India. She is a theologian and writer with a special interest in the lives of women. She has written books on caste, including "A Cry for Dignity - Religion, Violence and the Struggle of Dalit Women in India".*



*Crops of wheat and gram growing in fields below an anicut at Kaliyaghati village, Wakal river basin*

---

***We welcome your comments, but please be aware that we cannot enter into individual correspondence.***

Wells for India is a Company Limited by Guarantee Registered in England & Wales, no: 6484901UK; Registered Charity no: 1127564.

**[www.wellsforindia.org](http://www.wellsforindia.org)**