



CONSCIOUS LIVING

## Amla Ruia's pursuit of water independence in India

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### THROUGH HER CHARITABLE TRUST, THE PHILANTHROPIST HAS BEEN BUILDING CHECK DAMS IN THE COUNTRY FOR OVER A DECADE. IT'S A PRACTICE THAT PROMOTES TRADITIONAL WATER-HARVESTING TECHNIQUES AND CAN BE A FORMIDABLE WEAPON AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

A few years ago, while on one of her many trips through the most remote villages of Rajasthan building dams, Amla Ruia met Sharbati Devi. Ruia had just spearheaded the building of the latest check dam in Sharbati Devi's village of Pali and just as she was leaving, Sharbati Devi cornered her, insisting Ruia had to do the same in the neighbouring town of Ajmer for her brother. "I've seen first-hand what these dams can do, and you have to do it," she said. Ruia, although a bit taken aback and not sure what to make of almost being bullied into building a dam (whose genesis was governed by a whole set of strict protocols) was in a quandary. One of the main criteria for building these dams was the involvement of the village, even financially. While Ruia's Aakar Charitable Trust fronts 70 per cent of the expenses of the build, the village is expected to raise the remaining 30 per cent. It ensures accountability and responsibility.

Ruia conveyed her conditions to Sharbati Devi and explained how she wasn't sure if Ajmer would qualify. Sharbati Devi immediately dug out ₹35,000 and said, "You have my word, they will do it. I'm fronting the first bit of the money now." The now surprised Ruia told Sharbati Devi she will visit her brother's town, and meet her there.

She set off early next morning, her car trundling through the roads, only to find Sharbati Devi already waiting for her in Ajmer. She had set off the earlier night, determined to see the project through. Ruia, impressed, took on the project of building a check dam for the town, under her typical set of protocols. In that year, the town made a profit of ₹90 lakhs.



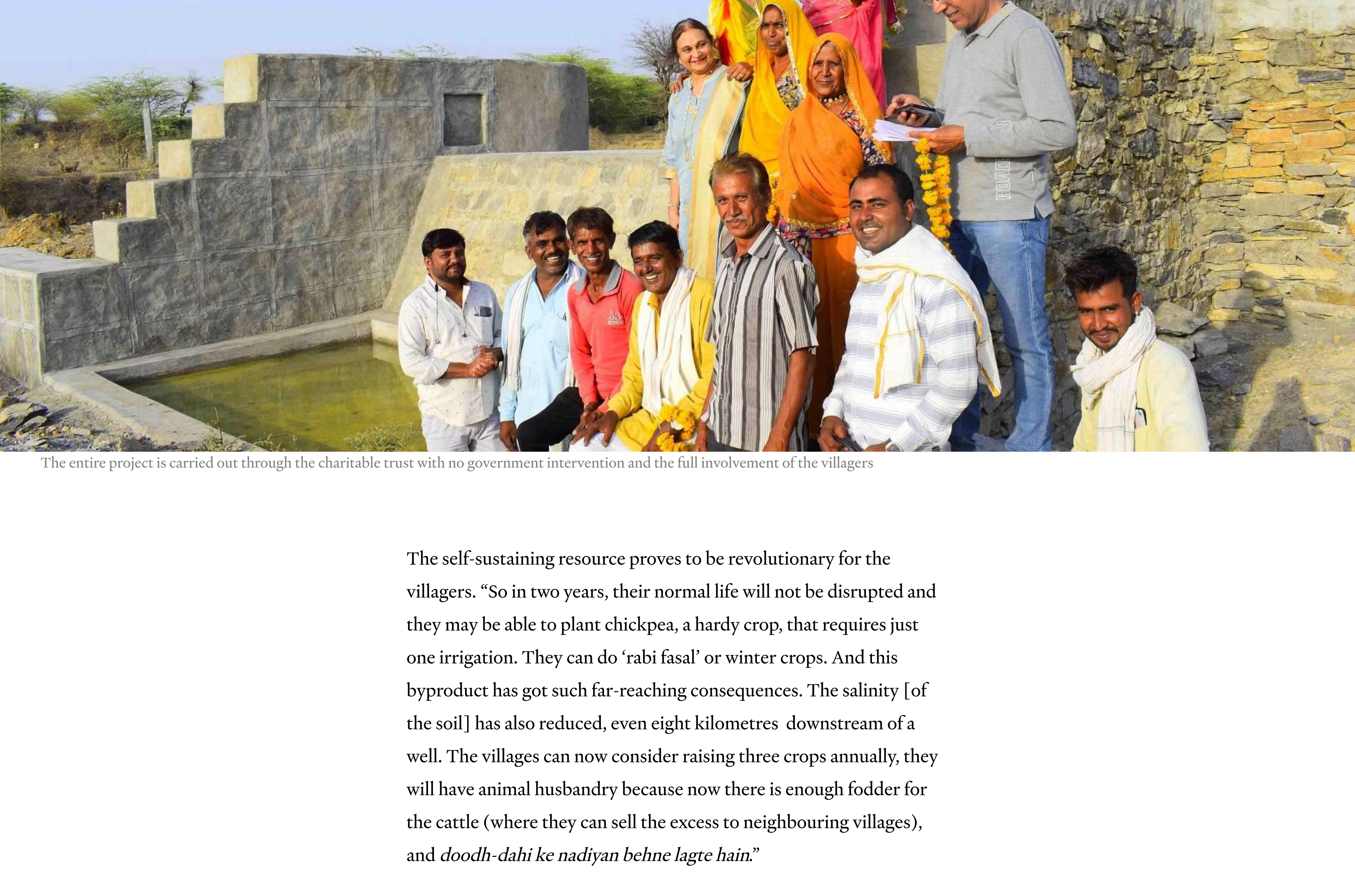
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### THE NEED FOR A SELF-SUSTAINING RESOURCE

This is pretty phenomenal, even if concentrated in one state. As a country, we are at a crisis point. The recently released World Water Development Report 2023 states that the global urban population facing water scarcity will touch 2.4 billion and that "India will be the most severely affected country". It's not just that geographically there are parts of India that will never receive enough water. The problem is also how the country uses the water that is available. "The check dams are not a new innovation," explains Ruia. "Our ancestors used this technology. With check dams, water gets recharged in small pockets. So in that vicinity and for 8-10 kilometres around it, a river would flow. If the rainfall was constant for a couple of years, then these rain streams would become perennial rivers." The nearby aquifers and wells preserve the water for the months when it's not available naturally.



The entire project is carried out through the charitable trust with no government intervention and the full involvement of the villagers

The self-sustaining resource proves to be revolutionary for the villagers. "So in two years, their normal life will not be disrupted and they may be able to plant chickpea, a hardy crop, that requires just one irrigation. They can do 'rabi fasal' or winter crops. And this byproduct has got such far-reaching consequences. The salinity [of the soil] has also reduced, even eight kilometres downstream of a well. The villages can now consider raising three crops annually, they will have animal husbandry because now there is enough fodder for the cattle (where they can sell the excess to neighbouring villages), and doodh-dahi ke nadiyan behne lagte hain."

Moreover, according to Ruia, women in these villages no longer have to travel long distances just to fetch water. "There is better nourishment in their diet, so their health improves. Earlier they were able to cultivate only two per cent of their land; after the check dams were built, they were able to take 98 per cent under cultivation. But this doesn't happen by itself—the villagers are invested. They have to work hard, and when they see the possibility of developing field after field, they show initiative. They take up ancillary industries, set up solar panels and hook it up to their water pumps, so the fields get irrigated automatically. All this while, they simply didn't have the opportunity," she explains.

### "WATER CREDIT IS AT A VERY NASCENT STAGE IN INDIA; THE LAWS ARE STILL BEING MADE AROUND IT. BUT IT'S A VERY EXCITING, NEW ASPECT TO THE WHOLE CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE"

**Amla Ruia**

The focus shifts from surviving to thriving, and this affects women too. Traditionally, it's the women who manage the business of animal husbandry. They are the ones who get to keep the profits of that business. And in most such villages, animal husbandry is considerably more profitable than farming," says Ruia. The women earning more can also mean smarter family decisions, like sending girls to school. Additionally, with better water supply, the girls in the family are no longer saddled with the responsibility of having to fill water, which, in turn, means that they can use that time to attend school. Higher education for all children also becomes a possibility.

Ruia's set of protocols aims at changing mindsets even before the check dams are built. Her conditions highlight that the village in consideration must give up detrimental practices like child marriage, dowry, *mrityu bhoj* (a mass feeding of villages on occasions honouring ancestors), and the consumption of alcohol and tobacco.

"Of course, I can't police their behaviour on a day-to-day basis, and I can't change ancient mindsets and beliefs. But I can explain that prosperity (goddess Lakshmi) is at your doorstep, and if you give in to these negative beliefs, that prosperity will leave," she says.



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### PLANTING THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

The entire project is carried out through the charitable trust with no government intervention and the full involvement of the villagers. Experts gauge the topography along with the villagers to mark out the ideal area to build the check dam which is half masonry, half earthen bund, and the villagers are then roped in to help with the build too, along with labour that the trust provides. It takes around 2-3 months to build a check dam, and between 1-1.5 months for repairs, if needed. The dams cost anything from ₹7-8 lakhs (from the sponsors) with an additional 30-40 per cent from the villages. Some big dams have also cost ₹2.5 lakhs, catering to 5-7 villages. Ruia is now replicating the model in Bihar and Chhattisgarh, and is looking into how to adapt it across the country, as different topography and climate also changes the model.

"But I am excited to do so much more," says Ruia. "Have you heard of water credit?" The idea stems from that of carbon footprint. Ever since the latter was first popularised and 'marketed' in the early 2000s by British Petroleum, it's gained traction as a measure of a country or individual's contribution to either killing or saving the environment. The concept of water credit operates on similar principles, where multinational companies can purchase Ruia's massive water credits to offset their water footprint. "So we are looking at ways of how we can put a number on the water resources we have created, and how we can convert them into water credit. This way, we can monetise them and get more funds to build more dams. Water credit is at a very nascent stage in India; the laws are still being made around it. But it's a very exciting, new aspect to the whole climate change debate."



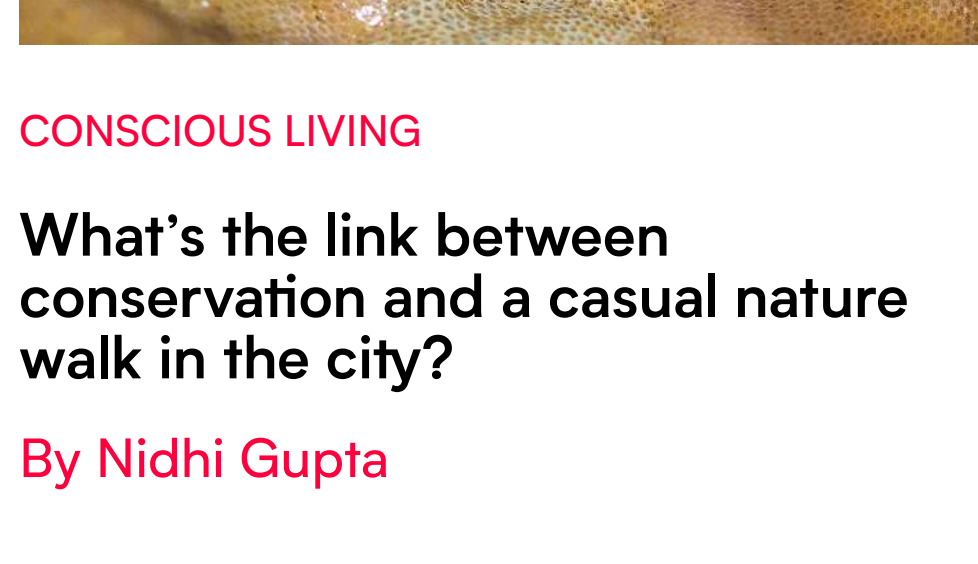
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Ruia has an encyclopaedia's worth of personal stories of how villagers across Rajasthan have had their lives changed because of a dam they had an opportunity to build, not just donated. Some share how they (the village) have become "crorepatis". Others are busy buying chunky gold jewellery for themselves and their wives, in anticipation of the dam in their village (they're that confident, having seen the wonders in the neighbouring villages). Through one-time donations made by the Trust's donors, villagers are able to reap the benefits for generations to come. Hope is a strange thing and comes in forms that many won't understand. In the light of unimaginable suffering, a man's delight is to be able to buy his wife a gold nose ring before the life-changing dam is even built. This might seem extravagant at best, foolish at worst. But what a world of difference it is to them—to imagine a life beyond the dry, parched earth that is home—and instead see it sparkle with a new lease of life. In their lives, water truly is gold.

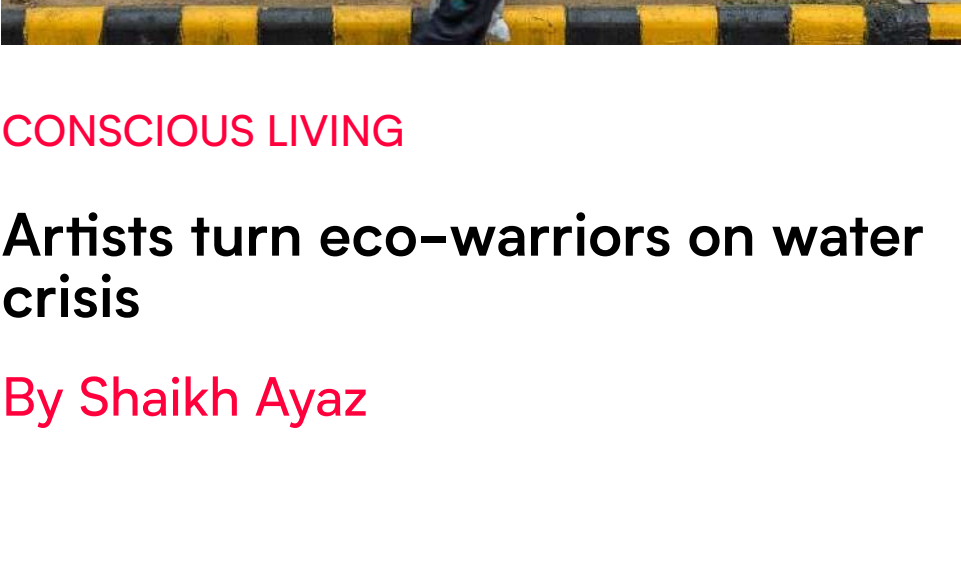
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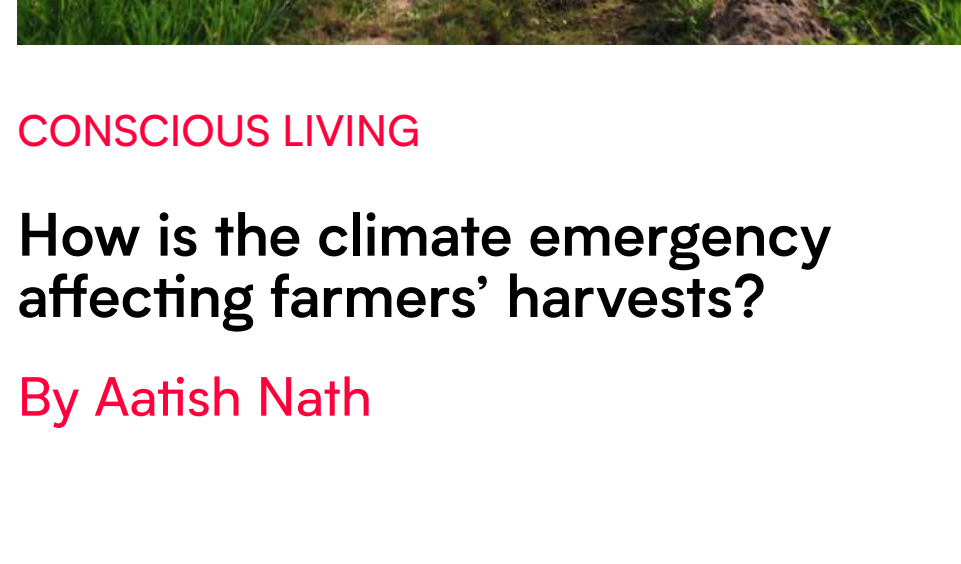
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