

# WOMEN'S SPECIAL EDITION

**Eco Guardian**  
AMLA RUIA



**Matron of Cement**  
VINITA SINGHANIA



**Bequeathing Marwari values**  
ANJU PODDAR





the state, national and international levels. Among the many awards she has been honoured with, the notable are the National Award for services to the handicapped by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment given by the

President of India, the Mahila Ratan Award by the International Friendship Society of India, the Sulakshana Ram Janam Pandey Award in Mumbai and the Ugadi Puraskar Award by the Madras Telugu Academy.

Ask her about her message to women, and Saraf is quick to answer: "First learn to love yourself; don't sit around idle. Try to be a strong tree, taking roots—don't live like a creeper, clinging onto someone to grow. Learn a skill and keep yourself busy." Words of wisdom there!

## When a mission becomes a passion

### **AMLA RUIA, AAKAR CHARITABLE TRUST**

*A severe drought in Rajasthan around 12 years ago was the turning point for Amla Ruia. Moved by the grim spectacle of widespread starvation deaths, despair and sheer helplessness all around, she made up her mind to address the water scarcity issue of the region, come what may.*

*Hailing from the arid Shekhawati region, Amla Ruia was well aware of the persisting water crisis. Her ruminations on the subject almost always ended with the inference that simply sending money and clothing to the affected was not an option anymore; a more permanent solution to the problem was imperative.*

*Her restlessness paved the way for starting a water harvesting drive. The moment was opportune too—with all her children settled down, there was ample spare time at her disposal. What better time to pursue her long-cherished spiritual aspirations and devote herself to the pressing need of serving the people of Mewar?*



Amla Ruia explains the benefits of a water harvesting pit at her home

### **Desert trails and elbow grease**

Initially, her husband was anxious at the thought of her travelling alone to remote areas of Rajasthan. Coming from the renowned Ruia family and living in a huge heritage home at Mumbai's upscale Malabar Hill, it seemed inconceivable she should be working in the heat and dust of the desert. "In my father-in-law's time, I would not have been able to do this," says Ruia, reflecting the sentiment of the Ruia household. The immediate family too questioned her decision to work in rural, forsaken areas. The one question that bothered all was how would she use the wash rooms in these underdeveloped villages? To the determined Ruia, however, no challenge was enormous enough to keep her from embarking on her mission.

It all started on a very small scale. The work entailed reviving old water bodies (*kunds*), cleaning/rebuilding

larger catchment areas with the help of the villagers and raising money from her personal network in Mumbai. "In those early days, I was very uncertain and asked a lot of questions; but as my work progressed, I developed confidence," says Ruia. Not particularly given to materialism, after some initial financial support from her husband, she sold her jewellery to finance her project. What had begun as a mission had turned into a passion! "Even though I have travelled overseas extensively and seen all the wonders of the world, travelling alone through these villages was a very different experience," says Ruia. In retrospect, Ruia has reasons to feel contented.

As of today, around 3,000 *kunds* have been revived, some new ones have been built and construction of 200 more is underway. They provide fresh drinking water and fulfil other domestic requirements. "Other corporate houses



should also come forward to start similar projects," Ruia encourages.

### Against all odds

Her journey, however, was no picnic. Given the intricacies of the local politics, the obstacles were innumerable. Determined, however, she fought on like a true *karmayogi*. She turned to well-known water harvester Rajendra Singh of the Tarun Bharat Sangh for guidance, whose invaluable help, advice and encouragement enabled her to keep going despite the many hurdles.

Amla Ruia's NGO, the Aakar Charitable Trust has since built hundreds of check dams in drought prone areas. Their tremendous impact on the local economy has shown in highly improvised crop acreage and yield figures, generating an income of around ₹ 51 crores—thanks to the regular availability of water for cultivation. Her efforts have not



Amla Ruia at work

gone unrecognised. Among the commendations for excellent work are Rajasthani Mahila Mandal's award for exemplary work in education and water, Bhamashah Seva Samaan from Kolkata and the title of 'Water Mother' awarded to her by Jal Biradari.

### The right path

Between her daily interactions with villagers, site meetings and decision-making, Ruia squeezes out time to visit Mumbai often. "When I was growing up in the 1950s, we Marwari families

led very simple and disciplined lives; it has stood me in good stead at this age," she reflects. As more and more villagers approach her to include their villages in her programme, Ruia walks on doing her "dharma" of "providing water to the villagers". What had started as social work, has grown into an obsession—a way of fulfilling her spiritual duty. So, ever so often, exuding infectious energy and motivation, she tells herself "I am on the right path!" as she walks on to the next village.

## Tailor-made to serve



Aruna Dalmia with students at Akshay Pratishthan

### ARUNA DALMIA, FOUNDER OF AKSHAY PRATISHTHAN

*Leading a life of a typical Marwari woman, then branching out in her 50's to follow her heart's desire, and then actually striking it big in the social sector is the amazing story of Aruna Dalmia, the founder of Akshay Pratishthan.*

*An iconic figure in her community today, Aruna Dalmia's upbringing in the large joint family of Sir Padamat Singhanian of the famed J K Group of Industries of Kanpur in the 1940's hardly offered scope for formal education. The only daughter among four brothers in the orthodox household, most of her education happened at home. On the few occasions when she did step into a school building, she fell violently sick, with which the doors of school closed on her for good.*