

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEGAL SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

[ISSN 2581-9453]

---

Volume 4 | Issue 4

2022

---

© 2022 *International Journal of Legal Science and Innovation*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.ijlsi.com/>

Under the aegis of VidhiAagaz – Inking Your Brain (<https://www.vidhiaagaz.com>)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the International Journal of Legal Science and Innovation at VidhiAagaz. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Legal Science and Innovation after due review.

In case of **any suggestion or complaint**, please contact [Gyan@vidhiaagaz.com](mailto:Gyan@vidhiaagaz.com).

---

**To submit your Manuscript** for Publication at **International Journal of Legal Science and Innovation**, kindly email your Manuscript at [editor.ijlsi@gmail.com](mailto:editor.ijlsi@gmail.com).

---

# Empowering Jal Sahelis: Women Water Warriors of Rural India

---

BRIJESH CHANDRA SRIVASTAVA<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Water has always been essential to life and livelihood in India. There are about 99 million individuals in the nation without access to safe water. Water scarcities in indigenous communities, particularly for women, are made worse by climate change and growing deserts. In India's drought-prone regions, particularly in Bundelkhand, EU financing for empowered hundreds of thousands of women volunteers to work toward securing water security. Due to repeated monsoon failures that resulted in drought, the availability of water in the Bundelkhand region has been progressively worse over time. The populace is seriously at risk from a lack of water for irrigation and drinking. Women of all ages who have issued a clarion call for water security in their communities are known as "Jal Sahelis" or "women water fighters." These female volunteers have been organised and trained on topics relevant to water resource planning, management, and conservation by Welthungerhilfe and their partner Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan. The volunteers are a part of the Jal Jan Jodo Abhiyan, a countrywide initiative that seeks to implement India's Right to Water. Today, 7 districts in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh are home to almost 500 Jal Sahelis who have been trained and put to work. They swiftly respond to water problems in their villages while wearing identical blue saris. To restore traditional ponds in villages, they have repaired handpumps, constructed check dams with government funding, and organised "shramdan," or voluntary contributions by the community. State and national governments, notably the Jal Shakti (Water Resources) Ministry of the Government of India, have praised them for their successful efforts in resolving water concerns. In short, in this paper I have tried to tell about the relationship between water and women empowerment through case study of Jal Sahelis.*

**Keywords:** Water, Jal Sahelis, Women, Bundelkhand

## I. INTRODUCTION

The "Jal Sahelis" are a group of women in Bundhelkhand who restore dried-up water sources. The women in this group are either completely illiterate or simply literate in the most basic of areas. The organisation is self-sufficient and receives no funding from the state. Their hard

---

<sup>1</sup> Author is a Research Scholar at Department of Political Science, Central University of Haryana, India.

efforts paved the path for the growth of the local communities. Jal Sahelis was founded in 2005 by a group of women from the Bundhelkhand region's Madhogarh village in the Jalaun Tehsil. Due to fluctuations in precipitation, the Bundelkhand region regularly suffers from drought every other year. Increases in farmer suicides, fatalities from starvation, joblessness, and migration have been observed over the past decade as a direct result of persistent droughts, shifting climate patterns, and a lack of government action. Traditional methods of water management and conservation have become outmoded as water sources have been depleted or dried up. In 2007, when a severe drought struck this area, a nonprofit named Parmarth attempted to mobilise rural Dalit women by forming an informal structure of Pani Panchayats and Jal Sahelis to address the unresolved problem of the water shortage. Pani Panchayats formed in the districts of Lalitpur, Jaulan, and Hamirpur to protect local water supplies and create models for sustainable water management strategies. It helped Dalit women break out of their conventional roles by allowing them to interact with men from higher castes at gramme sabhas and panchayati raj institutions and by giving them a voice in working with the local administration to ensure that water was distributed fairly throughout the villages. This organisation of about 1000 women works to improve 200 villages. Seven districts in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh are the focus of their activities. The group's female members range in age from 18 to 70 years old. They consult with the local panchayat bodies to find a solution to the water situation. When there was a water shortage, the ladies in the area used to have to travel far to get a pot of water, and the area's agricultural suffered as a result. These women from different villages in the drought-stricken region of Bundelkhand are working together to revive old water systems and practises. The "Jal Sahelis" construct check dams and desilt ancient ponds to collect rainwater for use in the summer. This helps to keep wells and borewells supplied with water. Thanks to their efforts, farmers in the area now grow three crops instead of just one, which has a positive impact on the economy. Due to their efforts, 100 villages in four districts of Uttar Pradesh may be able to overcome their water problems. They published a political party manifesto on environmental preservation in 2022.

## **II. RELATION BETWEEN WATER AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

For a woman who must walk for hours just to collect enough water to fill a bucket or two, having access to water is a source of empowerment and freedom from the drudgery of her daily life, the fear of abuse and violence, the breakup of her family due to forced migration, the loss of her land, and the struggle to meet her most basic needs of hunger and thirst. The water both allows her to relax and helps in the fight against injustice. Her life is better

because of water, in her opinion.

There is no shortage of stories about rural women fighting for better water access because they value the concept of "water continuity," or the idea that future generations should be able to use the water supply that current ones have used. Over the past five years, the Jal Sahelis have evolved into an empowered women who can talk with the confidence of seasoned campaigners. The women water warriors wear simple sarees and cover their heads while they speak in the regional tongue of Bundelkhandi Hindi to discuss the benefits of water harvesting and women's rights. Indian women are powerful, and they are reviving the country's dwindling water supply by implementing water conservation measures like growing water-efficient native crops and using their scientific acumen to end river pollution. In addition to reducing the need for people to migrate, their efforts boost food security, create decent jobs, and even enhance river health. Some of them went on to talk about how lockdowns and the COVID-19 outbreak had changed their priorities.

Gender equality and the concept of gender roles in a society are best expressed in the proportion of men and women in the labour force. The percentage of women actively participating in the workforce in India has consistently been low. While the World Bank predicts that it will be over 30% in Bangladesh and close to 34% in Sri Lanka in 2019, they predict that it will be about 20% worldwide. Children, ageing relatives, and housework are just some of the unpaid labour that women are often compelled to perform. Due to erroneous notions of gender roles, women are dissuaded from entering the formal labour market and the organised sector. It is not education that is to blame for the low participation rate. The most recent All India Survey on Higher Education (2019-20) report from the Indian Ministry of Education found that women now make up 49% of all students in Indian universities. India has the highest percentage of women in STEM graduate programmes worldwide. Over 42% of 2018 STEM graduates were women, a higher rate than in many developed countries. About 34% of the population did so in the United States, 27% in Germany, and 32% each in France and Canada. The increased enrolment rate does not appear to have translated into increased employment engagement in the organised sector. Men make up 71 percent of the workforce, compared to only 29 percent of women. Evidently, women in India do not have equal access to employment opportunities. Cultural norms have a soft power that continues to restrict women's economic mobility and the potential of "higher" education. The wage discrepancy between men and women is also quite large. Based on NSSO data from 2011-12, the ILO's The India Wage Report 2018 found that women earned 34% less than males for equivalent work and education. Women made up 68% of the casual labour force in rural

areas, while men made up only 47%. At the time, the NMW was Rs. 122/day (with an expected increase to around Rs. 178/day by the end of 2021). When women earn less than males, it has a direct impact on their ability to make important life choices including those related to their health, housing, and time spent with loved ones.

Except jal sahelis, there is also some other examples of water warriors which show the relation between water and women empowerment :

### **III. ATMS FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN**

Gaining economic independence is a crucial step toward improving women's social, political, and power positions. There is still hope for getting more women interested in STEM fields and in starting their own businesses, despite the fact that this is a challenging endeavour. There is little doubt that Safe Water Network's Small Water Enterprises is a model to be followed. Starting in 2008, Safe Water Network (SWN) installed automated teller machines that dispense water in remote areas of India. There is always potable water available thanks to automated water distributing machines (ATMs). The major objective was to ensure locals had access to clean water at an affordable price. It wasn't designed to promote women's equality at first. In 2016, SWN added a crucial piece by increasing opportunities for women in the water industry. There are currently more women than men working at water ATMs owned and operated by Safe Water Network. The residents of the area refer to them as "Water Aunties" out of respect and admiration. Several changes were made to the model and the programme to attract more middle-class women to the Water Auntie movement. Automatic coin dispensing that operates around the clock and the use of pre-paid RFID cards have been used to alleviate the need for women to wait in line at water ATMs. Each water ATM is equipped with a remote monitoring system that provides data on plant operations, such as production and sales volume, water quality, user engagement, etc., every 15 minutes. Functional and operation reporting are both made easier by this. For the purpose of repairs and upkeep, a local Field Service Entity was established, and audiovisual digital training modules were produced so that students could study at their own pace in the local language. In spite of the widespread spread of the Covid disease, these water dispensing machines were only out of service for around 2% of the time. SWN iJal water vending machine network serves about 3 lakh customers daily. More often than not, the water stations are owned and operated by women social entrepreneurs. These iJal value chain social entrepreneurs then employ women workers and run their companies with SWN help. However, the idea must actually overcome various social, political, and institutional challenges in order for women to

leave the home and take on technical and administrative jobs in the water business. Men are more common than women working in India's water sector. One-seventh of the workforce in India's water, sanitation, and hygiene sector are women. Managers, regulators, legislators, and technical specialists are all male-dominated fields. To motivate and coordinate women, SWN designed a unique strategic framework, call QUIT (an acronym for "question," "undo," "involve," and "trust"). Women in the workplace are blamed by most rural families for not attending to essential domestic tasks including child care, upkeep, and elder care. It's common for women to lack the confidence and work experience necessary to land a good job. Through advertising, women are encouraged to confront stereotypes and achieve their full potential in their chosen fields. Local leaders are invited to speak at planned meetings to provide motivation. There will be events aimed at encouraging women to abandon centuries-old sexist norms and practises.

SWN also found that low-income women tend to avoid fields that require technical knowledge, so offer technical and life skills instruction to help people get over their reservations about using new technologies and gain self-assurance. Women are taught how to handle and operate water ATMs so that they can work as field executives. Management of SWNs and decision-making authority are delegated to women. They learn to manage an organisation, to run its operations efficiently, and to handle money responsibly. They are "community mobilizers," whose job it is to inform residents of the region about the advantages of using clean water and recruit them as paying customers. In 2021, the Water Aunties Program was scaled up with the help of the SEWAH Alliance - Sustainable Enterprises for Water and Health, a USAID-supported initiative, to 25 cities across 11 Indian states. This resulted in the employment of over 550 women as programme operators and the creation of over 150 women business owners. SWN have trained over 110 active female members of Self Help Groups (SHGs) to utilise water quality test kits in the field.

#### **IV. DOUBLE-ENGINE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT**

Development organisations and policymakers now believe that focusing merely on economic empowerment will not lead to the kind of revolutionary change in women's lives that is needed. One effective tactic used by Global Women's Organizations (GWOs) is to consider all the social, cultural, legal, and political barriers to full gender equality. Global Women's Organizations (GWOs) are grassroots groups led by women that work to improve the lives of women and promote gender equality. In addition to providing women with economic independence and opportunities for meaningful engagement, water ATMs also serve as

GWOs by reducing the burden of transporting heavy water containers long distances. After years of collecting water, they were finally freed. Like cooking, gathering water is seen as a domestic chore best left to women. A UNICEF study found that women in households without running water spent over 250 minutes per day on water-related chores. Ideally, people wouldn't have to waste their time gathering water when they might be doing something more productive like working or learning. The ATMs reduce the workload of water collectors by placing readily available, inexpensive water near people's houses. These Water ATMs have evolved into Water Knowledge Resource Centers, serving as a beacon for the empowerment of women and a focal point for citizen engagement in municipal water projects such as rooftop rainwater harvesting, Jal Shakti Kendras for water conservation, a decrease in non-revenue water, and the monitoring and surveillance of water quality. The water vending machines also equip women with the knowledge and experience necessary to take on managerial responsibilities, pursue technical careers, and start their own businesses in the water sector. Women have proven they can be effective "agents of change" in bringing about national water security by working on the ground. Since they are becoming more involved in the water industry, they are able to exert that influence in other areas of their lives as well.

## **V. ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND MODUS OPERANDI OF JAL SAHELIS:**

Parmarth has spent the better part of the last quarter century working to alleviate water scarcity in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Mr. Anil Singh, the director of the organisation, and Dr. Sanjay Singh, the secretary, have implemented sustainable water models in more than a hundred villages in Bundelkhand. They have also set up a Pani Panchayat, a village-level organisation responsible for water management, conservation, planning, and the acquisition of government benefits for each and every community. Also, it has created a fantastic prototype for Jal Sahelis, a group of women volunteers who have been trained to address issues of water resource management, conservation, and planning. Keep in mind that all the women here didn't have educated. They were uninformed about either repair work or water tables. Therefore, teaching was Parmarth's primary mission. They developed a course to educate the ladies on water safety and hygiene. Their determination to work "outside of their realm" and challenge patriarchy had already caused friction with the men in their household. Through these initiatives, people would increase their knowledge of water sources, water scarcity, and mitigation strategies. Every member of the Jal Saheli agreed that women deserved access to water first, therefore they battled for it.

After nearly a year, the Jal Sahelis had restored or installed brand new handpumps in every household in Lalitpur. After their first year of duty, the 12 Jal Sahelis gained a sizable fan base. Men at this point in time have seen how competently the women are performing their duties and have encouraged them to keep it up. The situation in rural areas of traditionally patriarchal areas such as Lalitpur, Tikamgarh, and Jhansi must be comprehended. In doing so, the women have achieved a first. Manual labour is typically seen as a "man's job," although most people are unfamiliar with even the concepts of check dams and well revitalization. However, the 12 pioneering women have broken new ground by exceeding societal norms.

As of the now, 776 Jal Sahelis are linked to Parmarth. These Jal Sahelis work hard on a regular basis to restore and maintain ponds, keep hand pumps running smoothly by addressing any minor issues that may arise, and ensuring that the villagers always have access to clean water. Not only that, but they help with the upkeep of existing canals and the creation of brand new ones. During the periodic Pani Panchayat meetings, the Jal Sahelis collaborate with the community to draught the water budget and aid in the social audit.

The Jal Saheli prototype of Parmarth has won acclaim on a global scale as well as at the national and regional levels. Together, the Jal Sahelis (Water Guardians) Shivani, Sushma, Parvati, Geeta, Lakshmi, Seema, and Srikuvar and their dedicated team of state coordinators (Manvendra Singh, Satish, and Santosh) are reaching out to hundreds of communities to kick off water conservation initiatives. Women's priority access to water is also guaranteed and demanded by Parmarth's Drinking Water Security Action Plan. It's a major focus of the Action Plan.

### **Acknowledgement of the work of Jal Sahelis:**

The Jal Saheli model and the work of Parmarth have been acknowledged by both the Union Government and the Honorable Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Recently, Mr. Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, the Hon'ble Minister of the Jal Shakti Ministry, Government of India, acknowledged the work of the Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan and the Jal Sahelis in the villages of Bundelkhand.

United Nations Development Programme had also awarded group with Water Champion Award. Recently, the Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan's efforts to campaign for community-based water conservation techniques in rural India have achieved great headway. Some of Parmarth's effective water conservation measures in the Bundelkhand region have been incorporated into the curriculum for students in grades 6 through 8. NCERT is the premier educational organisation in India. Parmarth's community water conservation programmes

have earned a prominent place in Indian textbooks, particularly for the concept of "Jal Sahelis" (Women Water Friends). As the best practises are covered in the "Geography of India" textbook, the lessons will begin in the upcoming classes. The incorporation of Parmarth's efficient water conservation projects into the Indian educational system is a major step forward for students' learning and understanding. The future of India lies with its children, so it is important to teach them about water conservation initiatives being performed in the Bundelkhand region.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I tried to tell the relationship between water and women's empowerment through a case study of Jal Sahelis, because women and water, these two are the most important and most ignored in India. It means the empowerment of women and conservation of water is most essential at this time, when we are celebrating 75 years of independence. Jal Sahelis is such an example that shows that in conserving water women can play an important role and by giving this role to women one side we will conserve water and another side we will empower women.

We can understand the importance of water conservation and women's empowerment in the present scenario through the following data and report:

With only 4% of the world's freshwater resources, India, home to 1.3 billion people, leaves tens of millions without consistent access to drinkable water. According to a 2019 report by the government think tank Niti Aayog, more than 600 million Indians experience moderate to severe water stress. According to the research, the water issue kills nearly 200,000 people annually, and if nothing is done, by 2030, 40% of India's population won't have access to clean drinking water. Jal Sahelis is working towards the such direction to provide clean drinking water to villagers of the Bundelkhand region.

Over the next decade, India is expected to continue its rapid economic growth, earning the title of "the fastest-growing major economy in the world." Despite India's recent economic success, women and girls still face significant economic inequality. From 2019 to 2021, the National Family and Health Survey collected data on the demographics of India's population of over a billion people and found that there were more women than men (1,020 women for every 1,000 men). The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index for 2021 ranks India at 140th out of 153 countries, making it "the third-worst performer in South Asia." In comparison to its 2020 ranking of 112, India has fallen 28 places. The decline in the proportion of female ministers, from about 23% in 2019 to hardly 9% in 2021, is indicative of

a diminishing role for women in politics. Similarly, "from 24.8% to 22.3%," the percentage of working women has decreased.

Women in India make up the majority of the population, however, they still face challenges due in large part to traditional gender norms. The impacts of discrimination and gender inequality are far-reaching and varied. Efforts are being made to alleviate this issue by empowering women in India through various organisations. Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan is such an organization that is empowering women through Jal Sahelis.

So here we see in this paper How Jal Sahelis: Women Water Warriors of Rural India are empowered by Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan organization and how they are working for water conservation in Bundelkhand region. Here, in short, I can say women can play an important role in conserving water and organization can play a key role in empowering women, so Jal Sahelis be an inspirational example for us of the conservation of water through women's empowerment.

\*\*\*\*\*

## VII. REFERENCES

1. "An oasis of hope in parched Bundelkhand". *The New Indian Express*. 17 January 2021. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
2. "Bundelkhand 'Jal Sahelis' release 'public manifesto' for 2022 UP polls". *Hindustan Times*. 25 December 2021. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
3. Dutta, Taniya (22 March 2022). "How India's women 'water warriors' turned arid villages into plentiful oases". *The National*. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
4. "Empowering Jal Sahelis – women water warriors of rural India". *Welthungerhilfe*. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
5. "How Bundelkhand Women Are Trying To Revive Disappeared Water Bodies". *NDTV.com*. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
6. "In Parched Bundelkhand, Army of 735 'Water' Women Breathe Life into 150 Villages!". *The Better India*. 6 June 2019. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
7. "In UP, Women-Led Collectives Are Taking On Bundelkhand's Water Problem". *NDTV.com*. 17 June 2017. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
8. "Jal Sahelis: How women across Bundelkhand are reviving water harvesting techniques". *Firstpost*. 1 July 2022. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
9. "News On AIR - News Services Division, All India Radio News". *newsonair.gov.in*. 3 October 2020. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
10. "Not all heroes wear capes, some fight amongst us | India Water Portal". *indiawaterportal.org*. 4 June 2021. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
11. Singh, Ankita (18 January 2021). "Jal Sahelis: Reviving Parched Areas In Bundelkhand, Solving Water Woes". *theologicalindian.com*. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
12. "Social organisation recognised on World Water Day". *Hindustan Times*. 24 March 2022. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
13. Tiwari, Sadhika (23 March 2022). "Women Who Fought Drought: The Story of Jal Sahelis in Parched Bundelkhand". *TheQuint*. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
14. "UP Panchayat Election 2021: 'Jal Sahelis' of Jhansi Enter Fray to Solve Water Scarcity Issue". *News18*. 15 April 2021. Retrieved 30 June 2022.
15. "'Water women' quench thirst of central India's parched villages". *news.trust.org*. 27 August 2019. Retrieved 30 June 2022.

\*\*\*\*\*